

An Historical Context of Brexit

Written by James Flint

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JAMES FLINT, MAY 6 2016

The UK's place in (or out) of the European Union has become a highly contentious political debate. Unsurprisingly, the UK's historiography of political relations with our near neighbours on the continent, which we share, has come to be cited within this debate.

However, as well recommendable (if occasionally wearisome) texts on the philosophy of social science and methodology preach, the 'truth' is often difficult to locate and fix in place. There are many narratives within history, and the 'victor's' narrative often takes pride of place at the expense of contrarian perspectives. Here within lies many a strawman argument and re-writing of empirical events. For instance, for the Americans, the Battle of Paoli (1777) is known as the Paoli Massacre, whereas for the British it is just another recognised battle honour and victory for the Light Infantry.

An opinion piece in *The Times* by Matt Ridley presents a brief history of 'Brexit' of sorts, where he details "the peculiar agony of Britain's relationship with its neighbouring continent". Of course, this overlooks the simple truth that the British Isles is an island chain of Europe, with the neighbouring continents more properly being Asia and Africa, although this is perhaps beside the point. The point is that far from being a dilemma of "separate" or "close", the UK is a constituent part of Europe today in both physical geography and political geography.

The peoples of the UK through numerous waves of immigration (and invasion) from across the channel are descended from these oft-perceived foreign nations. Indeed, some even say much of the UK's west country are of Iberian descent as a result of the shipwrecked Spaniards of 1588, not to mention the Angles, Saxons, Normans and Danes et al.

It paints an engaging picture to present the early Britons who ejected the tentacles of the Roman Empire as nationalists, patriots and saviours, but this clearly pales in the face of the rhetorical 'what did the Romans ever do for us?' argument. As a classicist or historian may likely argue, much of greater European culture may trace some route to the classical period. Even in earlier times, these isles have been dependent upon our continent to some degree.

As taken from 'Historical Realism' ontology, on what can be known about 'reality' and subsequently 'truth', it is a certainty that historical values and context influence any inquiry. What can be said of yesteryear may not be pertinent to today, or to the future. Indeed, today's world and associated geo-political and social contexts are very different to those of previous generations.

In some sense, history may be seen to repeat itself in instances. But, the use of historical analogy (and metaphor) can be highly misleading within social science.

Whereas in the past the British Empire sought to avoid permitting any hegemonic power on our continent, just as the Empire often engaged in the practice of 'divide and conquer' in colonial ventures overseas – such practices may not be best appropriate for strategic visions and policy programming of today. The European Union is clearly not the same as Hitler's Nazism or Napoleon's Empire. Nor is it the Roman Catholic Church; the Reformation of Henry VIII is not comparable with #Brexit.

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Furthermore, 'identity' is a nuanced concept. Neo-medievalism, or split loyalties between the EU and the UK, as with the prior division between state and church, isn't necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, it provides a choice; it is liberal in giving latitude, personal liberty and freedom. Free trade and freedom of movement are just isolated parts of this. 'Splendid isolation' makes no sense in the contemporary globalised context.

The UK remains an island state and the ocean remains of great importance. However, there is now a land border with the EU, the Republic of Ireland, and rather than being focussed on the decisions and actions of our neighbours, trade routes and colonial possessions, the world is now far more complex and uncertain. The UK needs to be far more globalist in outlook. All sovereignty is relative; the Victorian notion of centralised sovereignty no longer exists, nor does the Greek notion of a state's 'autonomia'. Even private ventures and Non-Governmental Organisations now may compete with a state's influence.

City states no longer exist in post-Westphalia International Relations. Empires imploded and collapsed. The 'great powers' became superseded by the 'super powers', and now we compete and contend with the likes of an expansionist Communist China and Putin's Russia. Let it not be forgotten that, perhaps in addition to the utility of 'the bomb', the EU bringing economic and political integration and unity to post-World War II Europe is likely a leading reason for an absence of a World War III. Furthermore, when violence did break out in Europe during the 1990s, the EU was a leading agent of peace.

When the Roman's abandoned Britannia, the Roman Empire was weakened and the British Isles were worth little. Today, the European Union is strong and befitting of a globalised world, whereas the UK is stronger for being a constituent part of it. Being within the Union also provides options of its own, as with what Wendt once said on anarchy, the EU is very much what states make of it.

About the author:

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