

Making 'remain' the Cool Vote - Wolfgang Tillman & His Posters

Written by Joel Vessels

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JOEL VESSELS, JUN 6 2016

I won't pretend that I have studied all the intricacies involved in the Brexit debate; it's not that the ins and outs of predicted fiscal outcomes or likely political repercussions escape me – I just don't find them terribly interesting. Undoubtedly, on the face of it, the impact of Britain's exit from the European Union is economically significant for both sides. Britain accounts for almost 13% of the Union's population and just short of 15% of its earnings. The most optimistic case of Brexit projects a loss of income for the UK of 1.1% of GDP, while a more pessimistic scenario suggests an income fall of 3.1% or £50 billion per year. Generally, most opinion makers in Britain's business community have stayed outside the fray, but recently a third of the country's 100 largest companies aired their critiques of an exit, thus making public their support for remaining in the EU. In France, a country described as 'on the whole' wanting Britain 'to stay, but probably would not be that upset if they didn't', some have come to argue that the Brexit would be good for the EU generally and France specifically, as Paris would become an attractive pied-à-terre for international institutions involved with Europe that had been hitherto centered in London. More often however – whether it came from former prime minister Michel Rocard some two years ago or public intellectual Alain Duhamel recently – Gallic tut-tuts of Brexit have subtly echoed Charles de Gaulle's sentiments that the island nation never had, nor ever would truly 'moor alongside the continent'.

And that, I think is the real issue at hand. The *Financial Times* concluded in its own analyses of the economic consequences of a Brexit, simply stating that it 'does not easily pass any cost-benefit analysis' while Ian Bremmer dismissed any discussion of an over-bearing and regulatory EU preventing Great Britain from doing essentially whatever it pleases as disconnected from 'the weak reality'. This begs the question if something else is not at play here.

One need not look hard or far to find Nigel Farage and his reactionary UKIP Party with its wails of 'We want our country back', or even the gentler yet just as real lament of former Blair-era officials confessing that they didn't realize so many 'Polish plumbers' would come to the UK. Such sentiments have found purchase in the British Home Office's 2012 working paper titled simply *The Impacts of Migration on Social Cohesion and Integration*. Here, the authors suggest that the trend in 'perceptions of Britishness' has moved 'from an ancestral understanding . . . couched in ethno-cultural fixtures, to one based more on civic values and responsibilities'. The report offers that the effects of EU-facilitated migration on this trend are more correlative than causative, but there do seem to be observable differences at least in the 'soft measures' of *Britishness* between migrants and 'native-born, native heritage Britons'. In testing analyzed by the Migration Advisory Committee and the Home Office, migrants often had a higher opinion of 'British political institutions' and felt more strongly that they 'belonged' in the country. By contrast, native-born Brits often felt less at home and questioned the possibility of 'social cohesion'.

It's not surprising that in the EU's last decade, one defined by economic tumult capped by the refugee crisis, is tearing at the fabric of the Union and thus magnifying the issues associated with the Brexit referendum. The arguments in favor of leaving the EU are easily adduced, and often can be quickly drawn down to versions of Farage's common haranguing – even if such is now most 'credibly' coming from the mouth of former mayor of London Boris Johnson and his beyond-the-internet proof of Godwin's law. On the side of staying with the Union there is current Prime Minister David Cameron and what British tabloids have named simply Project Fear, which scaffolds

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the idea that no one knows precisely what will happen if Britain votes to leave the EU, but it will most certainly be worse than standing pat.

The response to the entire affair by some has been an earnest and important call for extensive democratic reform of the whole of the EU, spearheaded of late most prominently by economist-of-inequality Thomas Piketty and a collection of other academics, politicians, and journalists. And there is something to be said for this tack, there has long been a concern about the lack of transparency and truly democratic institutions in the EU – a sentiment that was forcibly expressed recently by a key ally of Cameron's who now insists that Britain must quit the 'arrogant and unaccountable' EU that has been "corruptly captured" by a self-serving elite'. But for all of its ultimate significance, even Piketty's calls for democratic reform are presently not much more than slightly more detailed expressions of the drum that has been beat by the second-generation Frankfurt School philosopher Jürgen Habermas for the last thirty-plus years.

But recently, another strategy has been taken on in defense of the EU and reasons for Britain to remain a member; and this one does not (implicitly at least) suggest the failings of the Union and offer promises of reform but instead tackles the culture of the Union and the already existent possibilities it offers to its individual citizens. Instead of blanching at the notion that Britishness has shifted away from a closed ethno-cultural base, it embraces the opportunities presented to the rational individual, who is a product of the liberal political project of the Enlightenment and the socio-economic opportunities proffered by modern technologies; the self-made citizen of Europe who is part of a community of their own choice rather than bound to one by accident of rooted place. Generation EasyJet in other words – a millennial update of *l'homme disponible* of the post-war years and beneficiary of 'les trente glorieuses' for whom distances were relatively unimportant and the possibilities of travel, leisure, study, employment, and simply adventure all prove enticing.

The man behind the campaign to demonstrate the utility and brilliance, but above all the sexiness and fashionability of the EU is the German-born, London-based photographer and 2000 Turner Prize winner Wolfgang Tillmans. His plan is fairly simple and straight-forward: a series of 25 posters featuring his own work cum simple but evocative, though occasionally abrasive, tag-lines. Listing some of the best-known and most polarizing figures who support the Brexit, a solid number of the posters effectively dare the viewer to side with the likes of Rupert Murdoch, Marine LePen, Vladimir Putin, and even Nigel Farage. At least one of the 25 suggests that only the EU supports the political rights of women and homosexuals against the right-wing, nativist populism that is on the rise across parts of Europe, while another makes particular reference to the hugely popular Glastonbury music festival demanding that planning attendees not come 'without using your postal vote'. This last reference is not incidental or mere happenstance; the youth vote in Britain has often been cited as the key to determining the success or failure of the 'Remain' campaign in particular given that the country is nearly unique among EU members in that it is the younger generation rather than the older that favors EU membership. Glastonbury in particular is a recognizable lodestone in that it is the largest of Britain's summer music festivals, with attendance in the neighborhood of 150,000 over its five-day run, and its start a day before the referendum has been seen by some as evidence of a conspiracy to force a 'diary clash' for those most likely to be both drawn by such an event and vote to stay with the EU. While the likelihood of this is fairly low, it has become issue enough for some to suggest that the scheduling on the part of the traditional 'old-guard' who favor Brexit-ing was deliberate and forced even the organizers of the festival to warn potential revelers to be aware of the potential conflict and look to postal voting. All the while it has reinforced the generational nature of the issue.

But there is something else going on in most of Tillman's posters. The captions, as stark and confrontational as they can be are often overlain on a McLuhan-esque *cool media* background that forces the viewer to interpret what they are seeing. Most of the images were taken from his earlier 2016 show in Portugal 'On the Verge of Visibility', which drew the viewer into a consideration of the most organic of boundaries: light bleeding into night, the sky meeting sea on the distant horizon, or even close-ups of jet engines from a flight the photographer was once on. In total, it is a meditation on the idea of borders themselves; in a recent *New Yorker* profile on Tillman and his posters he noted that while we possess a clean and clear idea of such in our minds, when we actually 'approach a cloud the edges dissolve into nothing, into a gradient' – the 'cloud' at stake in Tillman's posters is likely best understood as the *imagined community* of Europe itself.

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Perhaps it is unlikely that such a piquantly millennially-aimed and coolly cerebrally-based campaign will have much effect in wooing many of the more than 10% of potential referendum voters who still fall in the 'don't know' camp, but I for one appreciate the lovely and rational defense of the EU. The fact that it might also draw an insider's chuckle by subtle reference to a beloved British sketch can't hurt.

About the author:

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