

SAFE EUROPEAN HOME

A personal reflection on Brexit by MIKE HANNIS.

The EU ideal of 'ever closer union' is anathema to nationalists, because it seeks to build political structures for a world no longer based on nation states competing against one other. This has always been both the most idealistic and the most important aspect of the European project. Boris Johnson may want to endlessly relive a fictional version of world war two, but most Europeans have learnt the real history, and are serious about moving on from it.

Led by the disingenuous Johnson, the British media spent decades covering mythical regulations on banana curvature rather than reporting genuine political debates within the EU. In so doing they missed many struggles between the left's view of European integration as a strongly egalitarian project, and the right's attempts to make the southern and eastern 'periphery' serve the economies of the northern 'core'. There is a power struggle everywhere between people and capital, and it's no surprise that capital currently has far too much of the power in Brussels. The same goes for Westminster, but I haven't heard many voices where I live calling for us to take back control from unelected London bureaucrats and establish an independent Somerset.

Now more than ever, the EU needs a stronger commitment to regional redistribution if it is to fulfil its core mission of minimising conflict between member states. The problems of the eurozone illustrate this nicely – joint monetary policy won't work without first putting in place the redistributive joint economic policies required to make a single currency work for everyone. This is why many left-leaning Europeans say the answer to current problems is 'more Europe, not less'. They are not promoting some dastardly plan to crush plucky little countries under the heel of an evil superstate, but pursuing a goal of meaningful equality between all citizens of the EU. It may seem far-fetched from a British perspective, but this version of the project is still very much alive elsewhere in Europe, and may one day even succeed.

The events of the last year have made clear to me that my mixed European heritage gives me a different perspective on all this, even though I have lived almost my whole life in England. Apparently many British people do not see Europe as their home. A surprising number seem to have been persuaded by pernicious propaganda to see it as a strange foreign enemy, rather than as a geographical region the British Isles will always be part of.

A Personal Digression

I was named after my Greek Cypriot grandfather Michael Hadjiyannis. He was born in a small village in the Troodos mountains in 1896, when Cyprus was part of the Ottoman empire. For reasons that remain unclear, as a boy he made the short sea crossing to Egypt where he spent several years in the care of his uncle, who was working there for a German tobacco company.



Michael and Franziska Hadjiyannis with their daughters Hedwig and Theodora, and son Franciskos. This seems to be the only surviving picture of the whole family, probably taken in Cyprus around the end of WW2.

The first world war precipitated the final collapse of the Ottomans, and in 1914 Cyprus was annexed by Britain. Cypriots were now 'stateless persons', for whom travelling abroad meant asking express permission for specific journeys from the British authorities. Michael managed to get his travel documents and cutting a long story short, ended up in Germany, apprenticed to a Westphalian sausage-maker.

In the 1920s he met and married my German grandmother Franziska, whose family had immigrated from Poland to find work in the heavy industry along the Ruhr. Both she and one of her daughters were born in a small town called Oeventrop, situated between two of the big hydro-electric dams later famously attacked by the British with bouncing bombs. In the 1930s, as things deteriorated under the Nazis, my grandparents moved their young family to Cyprus where my father, their youngest child, was born and named Franciskos.

Longstanding tensions between Greek and Turkish communities in Cyprus flared up in the 1950s, culminating in an armed insurrection against the colonial British forces by Greek Cypriot guerrillas seeking union with Greece. (Independence in 1960 brought little relief. Cutting an even longer story even shorter, the eventual UN-enforced partition of the island into Greek and Turkish zones continues today.) Perhaps surprisingly, one way of escaping these troubles for many Cypriots of both communities was to emigrate to Britain. Upping sticks again, Michael and Franziska took this route, finally settling in London's Kentish Town.

Although both his older sisters made their way instead to the USA, my father followed his parents. Taking a job in an asbestos mine, he saved up for a passage to England. There he joined the RAF, trained as an electrical fitter, and soon got posted to Germany, where his language skills served him well. British forces were fighting in Cyprus though, and as a Cypriot in the RAF he attracted a certain amount of suspicion and resentment. Back in London in the 1960s, apparently in an attempt to become more British, he changed his name to Frank Hannis. Soon afterwards, he met and married my English mother, Susan.



Michael is joined in London's Trafalgar Square by his son Frank, freshly arrived to start a new life in Britain. Frank died in 2016, aged 80.

I was born in London in 1966. My birth was on the day of Ken Kesey's first big Acid Test, which may perhaps help explain why I later found myself inexorably drawn into a strange countercultural bubble, and living off-grid near Glastonbury for most of the last 25 years. During that time I've been a festival organiser, a low impact planning consultant, a member of an agitprop folk band, and an editor of *The Land*. Seeking broader conversations, I studied for a PhD in environmental politics and philosophy. I now work mainly in higher education, writing and teaching about ethics and sustainability. My academic work concerns how human beings perceive and interact with the non-human world, but also how we treat each other. The two are intimately linked: inequality and injustice drive unsustainability, as well as conflict.

Homes Within Homes

So for me, while Europe is not intrinsically better or worse than anywhere else, it is very much home. It's the place my family comes from – a large place perhaps, but still quite small in global terms. Europe the place is a much more fundamental reality than the shifting patchwork of nation states forcibly overlain upon it, whose endless wars eventually led to the peaceful formation of the European Union. Nation states like Britain, Germany, Cyprus, and Poland also occupy real physical places, with complex histories and rich local traditions – but those places, histories and traditions are also parts of the larger story of Europe.

Seeing Europe as home is no more or less realistic than seeing Somerset, England, or Britain in that light. Each is nested within the next. Each larger home can add a rich new layer of identity, emphasising new commonalities without erasing difference.

There is no good reason to accord any privileged status in this continuum to nation states, most of which have been established by force for the benefit of the powerful. Ultimately of course there is a very real sense in which all human beings can see planet Earth as our common home, even though this idea is currently under sustained attack.

None of these larger homes need conflict with the human-scale local communities to which we have, or hope to have, much more immediate physical and personal bonds. As the old green cliché has it, it is not only possible but essential to 'think global and act local', to recognise the many levels of community we are all part of, rather than to be seduced by those deliberately and nefariously muddling localism with nationalism (see 'Green Conservatism', *The Land* 13).

Citizenship and Cosmopolitanism

Brexit however represents a determined rejection of such ways of thinking. Defying reality, it demands that all 'British people' nail their colours to the mast and declare that Britain is home, and everywhere else is not. It is a rejection not only of European idealism, but of any aspiration to build co-operation across borders. That it is presented as a turn away from Europe but 'towards the world' would be laughable if it were not so dangerous. It is precisely a denial of global perspectives.

At the 2016 Tory conference, Theresa May proclaimed: "If you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means." This kind of rhetoric explicitly seeks to enforce a dissent-crushing compulsory patriotism. Cleverly presented as an attack on mobile élites, in fact it is an attack on anyone who doesn't consider 'Britishness' the beginning and end of their identity, whether because of their own heritage or because of their political beliefs. Most people in this category are not members of any powerful élite. To attack the idea of being a citizen of the world is to delegitimise international solidarity, thereby atomising resistance and protecting the powerful.

A Greek phrase meaning 'citizen of the world' gives us the modern English word 'cosmopolitan', meaning essentially someone who believes all human beings belong to one community. Cosmopolitanism has a long and illustrious history, and as discussed above, need not conflict with more local loyalties. But it has long angered nationalists and authoritarians. Both Hitler and Stalin used 'cosmopolitan' – Stalin liked to add the adjective 'rootless' – as a coded insult for Jewish people and others whose loyalties did not stop at the national border.

Migration

Cosmopolitan sentiment ran high after the Second World War, when the roots of the present-day EU were laid down. As with the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and many other initiatives of that era, the overarching aim was to ensure that extreme nationalism could never again go unchecked. This was not a defensive project, but one proudly motivated by high ideals of global human solidarity. Such ideals are easily mocked, but are more vital today than ever.

Currently, all British citizens are automatically and additionally citizens of the European Union. After Brexit, they will be stripped of that status, no matter where they live or how important it may be for them to retain it. EU citizenship is not an insignificant privilege to lose, and anyone who does not know exactly what this entails would be well advised to find out. I find it hard to understand why anyone would voluntarily give up their own citizenship of the EU. How anyone could believe that the referendum result justifies taking that status away from sixty million people, I find impossible to imagine.

Self-destruction

If it really does come to pass, disentangling Britain from the EU will take a long time. It will divert resources from many more genuinely urgent tasks. It will poison relations with our nearest neighbours, and undermine hard-won environmental and social protections. All this will happen not in pursuit of the so-called ‘will of the people’ but because of a badly-managed internal dispute within the Conservative Party. An unconstitutional and poorly drafted referendum produced a narrow victory for the mendacious leave campaign, which was given an easy ride by the fact that the supposed remain camp never actually had anything positive to say about the EU. Seventeen million voted to leave, sixteen million to stay in, and thirteen million people eligible to vote did not do so.

Since the referendum MPs have been cowed into silence, paralysed by the headlights of the oncoming juggernaut. Repeatedly voting for something three quarters of them do not believe in, they continue to pave the way for the tortuously self-destructive process of putting a wildly impractical idea into practice. With the honourable exception of Caroline Lucas (and a less honourable handful of LibDems), there is no meaningful resistance to Brexit in Parliament, leaving the field wide open for any more grassroots movement which may yet arise.

EU membership has been presented as detrimental both to British self-sufficiency and to our trade with further-flung nations. Yet the economic plan for Brexit, such as it is, seems to rely not on increased domestic production or on reduced imports, but on increasing the volume of trade with distant (preferably English-speaking) countries such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

This would not only increase carbon footprints, food miles, and pretty much every other measure of unsustainability. It would also fly in the face of any meaningful version of localism. At the level of international trade, Europe *is* local, and always will be. The toxic combination of simplistic nativism and cynical propaganda has triumphed not only over internationalism, but also over reason and practicality. But still the madness persists, because the real reason for it lies elsewhere.

Brexit was always primarily about immigration, about the potent myth of ‘taking back control of our borders’. Both sides acknowledged that this was above all what those seventeen million people were persuaded to vote for.

Some were no doubt seeking protection for a precious mythical Englishness, perhaps rosily remembered from their youth, which they felt was being unacceptably diluted. A few of these may perhaps be justifiably called racist, and Brexit has certainly emboldened these few – but fortunately there are not enough of them to justify the lazy claim that racism explains the referendum result.

A much larger number were encouraged to blame immigration for the fact that a deeply unequal society had failed to provide them with secure work, affordable housing or well-functioning public services. The real reason for such problems is that since at least 1979, wealth has been redistributed upwards in Britain rather than downwards, ensuring that the impacts of both internal and external challenges are borne disproportionately by those on lower incomes. The post-war social contract has been thoroughly broken, leaving houses as prohibitively expensive investment vehicles, unions powerless, and critical infrastructure privatised. Not for the first or last time, scapegoating immigrants has proved a highly effective political tactic for diverting attention from the real issues.

Migration is a fact of modern life, and that many will be disappointed when they discover that leaving the EU hasn’t reduced it. But in reality there are hundreds of thousands of empty homes in Britain, a rapidly ageing population, and plenty of resources to share. This country can afford to be generous – and its history gives it an obligation to be so. To make this work though, we would need to be generous to each other too. As ever, this would mean redistributing money and land away from the far-fewer-than-1%, who would much prefer everyone to be looking the other way, arguing about the terms of Brexit, and blaming immigration for their problems.

Migration is a leveller, and a disrupter of the *status quo*. There are good reasons to welcome this, rather than fear it. The same is true at EU level, and even more so in the vast and arguably underpopulated USA (see ‘This Elephant is a Red Herring’, *The Land* 17). Building walls, whether physical, economic or political, will never be anything other than a very short term solution to challenges posed by human migration.

Ideally, no-one should have to give up their roots in order to survive. Governments of rich countries, especially those that got rich through colonialism, can work to reduce migration ‘push factors’, not least by judicious use of foreign aid to genuinely strengthen local economies and communities elsewhere. But they also have a moral duty to be open, to be welcoming, and to recognise that people make the difficult choice to migrate only for good reasons, and usually as a last resort.

For cosmopolitans, Brexit is a deeply symbolic step backwards. Looking across the Atlantic, and indeed elsewhere, it is clear that the retreat into nationalism is not only an English problem. History has seen this tide ebb and flow before, but for now, liberal cosmopolitanism seems to be in global decline. For all its imperfections, I find myself mourning its passing.