

REFLECTIONS ON THE RHETORIC OF (DE)COLONIZATION IN BREXIT DISCOURSE

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Abstract

*This essay begins with an acknowledgment that attempts to understand Brexit are, at this stage, condemned to partial understanding, at best, because as an event it is incomplete and moving in contradictory directions. Just a brief inventory of the many ways in which Brexit can be, and has been, approached gives one a sense of this centrifugalism – sovereignty; globalization; free trade; immigration; racism; disenfranchisement; nostalgia; affect; generational schism; post-imperial decline; neoliberalism; populism; poverty; austerity; class; multiculturalism; cosmopolitanism; far-right and Islamist extremism; Islam and Muslims; refugees; and so on and so on. One particular line of thought emerging among more scholarly treatments from within the arts and humanities (for example, as found in several essays in the volume *Brexit and Literature*) concerns itself with Brexit as an affective phenomenon, one that speaks to the structures of feeling that bind ‘Britishness’ into a cultural assemblage that goes beyond the artefactual sense of ‘culture’ to that nebulous and barely perceptible ‘way of life’ which constitutes the affective economy of most people living in the British Isles. This, however, is articulated – in the sense used by Stuart Hall – in very different ways depending on class, gender, region, educational background, nationality and, of course, race and ethnicity. This essay will probe the ways in which the affective economy of Brexit is mobilized by picking out one particular thread from within the tangled knot of multiple determinations that have brought the United Kingdom to where it now is: this thread follows the trope of (de)colonization across Brexit rhetorics and places it within a long durée that illuminates the extent to which the affective economy underlying Brexit is deeply embedded in a racialized sense of nationhood that reaches back to the beginnings of Britain’s colonial and thence post-colonial history.*

Keywords: Brexit, decolonization, colonization, imperialism, affect, rhetoric

Full text:

DOI:

Biographical note

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Brexit has induced a political crisis within the United Kingdom that may lead to its political disintegration. It is possible, perhaps even probable, that Scotland will seek independence, especially if a 'hard' Brexit materialises, and it is impossible to predict the consequences of such an outcome for Northern Ireland; indeed, it is possible that it may achieve the unification of Ireland in a way that would have been unthinkable until now. If these things happen, Brexit will have produced two of the greatest of historical ironies, the dissolution of a political unit brought about by its search for some kind of undiluted sovereignty and the re-unification of Ireland precipitated by people apparently committed to the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. On another level, the electoral system is another likely casualty of the Brexit process. The series of crises and debacles that have accompanied the tortuous crawl towards departure have thrown the entire political system into disrepute, culminating in a political humiliation for both the main political parties in the somewhat pointless, but nevertheless highly significant, elections to the European Parliament in May 2019. This exploded the two-party political ecology of British democracy, and the first-past-the-post electoral system that is its corollary. Britain's political environment is now a multi-party system that, in the long-(perhaps even short- or medium-)term cannot be adequately serviced by its current electoral system. In terms of both its political architecture and its political infrastructure, then, Brexit has brought about a situation in which 'the centre cannot hold', to use Yeats' resonant phraseology of political apocalypse (Yeats, 1991, p.187).

This essay is an attempt to interrogate and explore the value and significance of certain metaphors mobilized within Brexit discourse, so it is perhaps apposite to begin by pointing out that Brexit is a political explosion that is likely to have consequences in which the metaphor is materialised and made manifest in several ways. Brexit is an event, one that is still unfolding, is yet incomplete – despite the official departure of the UK from the EU on 31 January 2020 – and is moving in multiple and contradictory directions. To try and account for it, to gather one's

thoughts about it is difficult – I won't say impossible – precisely because, as a still unfolding event, it involves an explosive scattering in all sorts of directions all at once. Just a brief inventory of the many ways in which Brexit can be, and has been, approached gives one a sense of this centrifugalism – sovereignty; globalization; free trade; immigration; racism; disenfranchisement; nostalgia; affect; generational schism; post-imperial decline; neoliberalism; populism; poverty; austerity; class; multiculturalism; cosmopolitanism; far-right and Islamist extremism; Islam and Muslims; refugees; and so on and so on. How can one account for all these and more ways in which Brexit has charged the social imaginary of twenty-first-century Britain, and galvanized forces that had lain dormant only to erupt in a furious mass of swirling, inchoate and perhaps uncontrollable social energy?

With this in mind, I am going to pick up one little thread in the rhetorical fabric of Brexit discourse and try to unravel some of its implications. This is the trope of (de)colonization that periodically surfaces, but which is more or less latent in Brexiteer discourse. It becomes visible mostly during moments of acute crisis – the critical weeks and months leading up to and immediately after the referendum itself, for example; or during the periods when the Brexit negotiations reach crunch point, such as after the brokering of what has become known as the Chequers agreement when Boris Johnson resigned from the Cabinet, arguing that the Chequers plan would reduce the UK 'to the status of a colony' (Stewart et al, 2018).

This was not the first time that the trope of colonization surfaced in Brexit discourses. Indeed, the legacy of British imperialism is a fundamental determinant of the Brexit imaginary (Mondal, 2018; Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019; O'Toole, 2019). In an earlier essay (2018), I suggested that the dominant narrative that was established immediately after the referendum, which had it that Brexit was principally driven by the frustrations, disempowerment and disenfranchisement of the 'left behind' remnants of a disaggregated, disintegrated urban working-class who formerly voted for the Labour Party, was in fact belied by close analysis of the voting patterns, which suggest that the majority of Brexit voters were relatively well-off, middle-class voters in the rural, suburban and small urban centres of the Tory shires.¹ What these two groups (the 'left behind' and the well-off) had in common was, to my mind, an 'imperialist nostalgic nationalism' that constituted an affect, a structure of

¹ This has been corroborated through more detailed analysis of much more extensive data by Danny Dorling and Susan Tomlinson (2019).

feeling, in which a (perhaps, the) principal ingredient was a racial imaginary rooted in the hierarchies of British imperialism. The mobilization of this affective relation to the Empire could be seen in the importance of immigration as the premier logic determining voting intention at the referendum, and the continuities between the discourses on unrestricted migration from the EU with the discourses surrounding post-war migration from former British colonies. The Brexit imaginary may have appeared, on the surface, to be referring principally to white migration from the EU – hence its apparent alibi against accusations of racism – but it was, in fact, a displacement of a colonial racial imaginary that is principally concerned with non-white racial others. As I also pointed out, within British racial imaginaries certain ‘white’ groups have in any case always been racialized by association with non-white racial others depending on political context, as the Irish and southern Europeans have long known, and now eastern Europeans have found out.

My reflections here on the trope of (de) colonialization are therefore offered as embellishments and refinements of this previous argument, and I will begin by drawing attention to the brackets in the title, for they signal a notable doubleness in the trope that I want to investigate. The brackets signal the way in which the trope gestures, simultaneously, towards both colonization and decolonization as operative metaphors within the Brexit imaginary.² Johnson’s statement, for instance, speaks to the idea that a certain kind of Brexit, as represented by the Chequers plan or, more generally, by the term ‘soft Brexit’ will lead to Britain becoming a colony of the EU. But much of the force of Brexit as a mobilizing affect involves the imagining of Britain as *already* being a colony of the EU. Other terms have been used in Brexit discourse to reference this, such as vassalage or dependency, but the desire for ‘independence’ – articulated most clearly by Nigel Farage the morning after the referendum – clearly signals a cluster of emotional resonances concerning colonization (seen as a bad thing) and decolonization (seen as good). When Farage – a man not known for his reluctance to overstate his case – declared on 24 June 2016 that it would henceforth be known as ‘our independence day’ he was simultaneously drawing on the affective capital of the Fourth of July celebrations in the United

States as a signifier of Liberty, and turning the tables on Britain’s characterization as a colonial overlord that suppressed the spirit of liberty. Britain was now no longer an oppressor, but one of the oppressed, longing to be free. According to this line of thinking, Brexit was the moment when, to borrow from Nehru a little, the ‘soul of a nation, long suppressed’ found ‘utterance’.

One can witness this trope – and its double signification – playing out not only in public political discourse, but also in the more rarefied arena of academic historical enquiry. In a recent book, the maritime historian Andrew Lambert (2018) has argued that liberal values – and therefore, presumably, liberty and the rule of law – were propagated by ‘seapowers’ (of which early modern Britain was the exemplary example) in contrast to repressive, authoritarian ‘landpowers’. Reviewing the book in the *Times Higher Education*, Sarah Kinkel suggests that,

[t]his may be because, like everyone else, [Lambert] has Brexit on his mind. Explaining history as a long struggle between progressive, liberal seapowers and repressive hierarchical land powers is a justification for the claim that the European Union is a new continental hegemon, on a trajectory to become ‘an empire, not a nation, closer to Russia and China than the liberal democratic nation states that are the legacy of seapower.’

(Kinkel, 2018)

What is remarkable about that final statement, and indeed the thesis of Lambert’s book as a whole, is the way in which it refers at once to the decolonization trope and yet also lays claim to the mantle and legacy of liberal imperialism that stands in the long historical lineage that connects Whig advocates of empire like Macaulay with the liberal humanitarian interventionism of Tony Blair. Moreover, there is something very intriguing about the structure of Lambert’s thesis which also exposes the doubleness of the trope of (de)colonization within Brexiteer discourse. As Kinkel notes (2018): ‘The implication is that Britain will rediscover the good parts of seapower once it’s freed from European shackles.’ Re-discover. The moment of liberation, of unshackling, of decolonization is posited – as it usually is by all Brexiteers – as a new beginning. But it is a new beginning that circles back to a previous beginning, the moment when Britain embarked upon its long journey toward maritime pre-eminence, a journey that took in, along the way, the colonization of much of Australasia, Asia, Africa and the Americas; a journey that concluded in its assumption of the mantle of Empire. If it seems somewhat ironic that Lambert

2 Fintan O’Toole (2019) has also noted and commented on this in his magnificent book-length commentary on Brexit, although when this essay was first delivered as a keynote lecture to the ‘Brexit Wounds’ conference in Manchester in October 2018, O’Toole’s book had not yet become available.

should both castigate the EU as an imperial formation and celebrate Britain's liberation from empire by returning to the beginning of its own historical journey towards becoming an empire, then this is an irony that Brexiteers can, it seems, live very comfortably with.

There are two further points that can be teased out of this double-signification. The first is that it corroborates Robert Eaglestone's point that Brexit is an affect that can be characterized as a 'cruel nostalgia' (Eaglestone, 2018). Drawing on the affect theory of Lauren Berlant, whose book *Cruel Optimism* (2011) analyses the affective power of the American Dream, and conceptualizes it as a 'cruel optimism', Eaglestone writes that '[o]ptimism becomes cruel when hoping or striving for what you desire is actually harming you...the object of desire remains a fantasy, and your commitment to that fantasy damages you: "get rich or die trying" [which is one of the key axioms of the American Dream] isn't healthy' (p.95). Eaglestone quotes Berlant as saying that 'an optimistic attachment is cruel when the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that people bring to it: but its life organising status can trump interfering with the damage it provokes' (p.95). Insofar as Brexit looks forward to a new beginning, it can be characterized as a cruel optimism – and the people of those regions of the UK most dependent on EU funding, those regions that most overwhelmingly voted Leave, may soon find out just how cruel their optimism was. But, says Eaglestone, Brexit is 'nearly' a very good example of cruel optimism. There is, however, one crucial difference: 'Most affect theory deals with the present or (as in the case of cruel optimism) a focus on the future which ignores the detrimental effects in the present: but Brexit focusses on the past. Not cruel optimism, but cruel nostalgia' (pp.95–6). But again, we find a doubleness that is not necessarily inscribed in nostalgia per se. Nostalgia, as such, does not have to look to the past in order to look forward; Brexit, however, does. It is, perhaps, both cruel optimism and cruel nostalgia.

The second point is that Lambert's particular return to the beginning calls forth the trope of (de) colonization in a way that rehabilitates a crucial historical distinction that is often now overlooked and, in the process, sheds some light on the affective force of 'free trade' as a term within the Brexit lexicon. Imagining Brexit as a new beginning that is also a re-iteration of a prior beginning, as Britain begins to rule (once more) the waves, recalls an early association between trade, colonization and liberty, which was opposed at first to 'imperialism' and then, gradually and eventually, enveloped within the latter concept as

the loss of Britain's major colonies in America shifted attention to the east, where trading companies such as the East India Company were increasingly assuming the roles and responsibilities of government over the territories they had acquired as a result not of 'colonization' but of trade and commerce.

It is worth excavating some of the history of this transition in order to illuminate some of the subterranean political imaginings that have been exhumed and re-animated by Brexit. The association of colonization (as opposed to decolonization) with liberty can be traced – in the English and American social imaginaries, at least – back to the establishment of the first American colonies, a mythic inscription of the desire for religious liberty on American soil being the motivation for the Mayflower settlers in Plymouth. But it is worth recalling that, historically speaking, the first English colonists in America were motivated by a desire for enrichment, inspired by the earlier Spanish expeditions and conquests and legends of gold and El Dorado. The failure of these early colonies prompted the establishment of colonial economies in which trade became a vital element of survival, and thence economic growth, development and expansion (Pagden, 1998, pp.35–6). The key move, which was necessary for the establishment of the early colonies within the orbit of European commerce, was the development of an agricultural economy that in turn instituted a logic of territorial settlement in the colony, as inscribed in the common name for the 'colony' at the time: 'plantation'. As Nicholas Canny has noted, the term 'plantation' has 'gentler, horticultural associations' and 'the various English settlements in North America were known from the outset as "plantations"' (2001, p.8).

This in turn meant that the problem of colonization in this early phase was the securing of rights over the lands on which the plantations were to be established. Enter John Locke and his *Second treatise of Government* (1689) which would enable the theorization of such territory as 'unoccupied' because a man could only secure rights of ownership over something if he 'mixed his Labour with it' (p.306); in other words, the land needed to be worked, and since the Native American tribes the settlers encountered were not agriculturalists who worked the land in ways that the Europeans could understand – since, that is, they lived in a 'pre-commercial' state (Pagden, 1998, p.45) – they had no claim to it and it could be appropriated by the settlers (p.42). This, of course, was a prelude to the terra nullius concept that would facilitate settler colonialisms elsewhere, most notably in Australia and Southern Africa, but the key point here is that it obscures and overwrites any association

of colonization with conquest, and enables English colonists to imagine themselves as having 'freely' acquired their territorial possessions. The space of the colony remains a space of liberty.

We see here, then, in the very origins of English colonization of the Americas a nascent nexus of religious liberty, trade and territorial settlement that gave to the term colonization a positive meaning that was contrasted with a Spanish imperialism that was associated with cruelty and despotism. 'Since the English were eager to insist ... upon the peaceful nature of their settlements, and to dissociate themselves from the image of conquest', writes Pagden, '[f]ew Englishmen believed that they ... had deprived anyone of their inheritance' unlike the Spanish who 'had invaded territories rightly occupied by legitimate, if primitive, rulers' (the perceived civilizational difference between the urban Aztecs and Incas and the nomadic north American tribes was hugely significant here) (1998, p.51). Indeed, many believed they 'were not the conquerors of Indians, but their saviours, not only from paganism and pre-agricultural modes of subsistence, but also Spanish tyranny' (p.52). Nothing captures this early sense of colonization as a handmaiden to liberty better than Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*, in which a self-reliant, self-inventing and therefore 'free' individual (what better metaphor is there for the kind of liberty in which an individual is free from external constraints on their will – the kind later thought of as 'negative' liberty – than the desert island man?) is rewarded with vast riches and, more significantly, sovereignty in both a personal and political sense for his efforts in establishing a colonial outpost on unoccupied earth. As Ian Watt has pointed out, part of the enduring appeal of Defoe's narrative is its 'mythic' character, one which clearly resonates today in the ersatz colonial nostalgia of Brexit in which Britain 'goes-it-alone'; but it is also important to heed John Richetti's warning that in *Robinson Crusoe* we do not find this myth fully established but rather in the process of being fashioned (Richetti, 2001). It is interesting, then, to find this passage in which Crusoe resolves not to kill the cannibals on the island by suggesting that such an act would be akin to the cruelty and barbarism of Spanish imperialism (thereby implicitly contrasting it with England's more benevolent 'colonialism' in the reader's mind):

This would justify the conduct of the Spaniards in all their barbarities practis'd in America... where they destroy'd millions of these people... the rooting them out of the country, is spoken of with the utmost abhorrence... by all other Christian nations of Europe, as a meer butchery,

a bloody and unnatural piece of cruelty, unjustifiable to either God or man.

(Defoe, 2001, p.136)

This association of despotism with Catholic Spain's imperialism was reinforced by Protestant England's concurrent characterisation of the Ottoman Empire as similarly despotic (Pagden, 1998, p.52; Matar, 1999). In this early phase, then, the phase of mercantile colonialism – the phase that is so memorably articulated by Robinson Crusoe – imperialism was pejoratively opposed to colonization, and associated with authoritarianism, despotism, Catholicism and Islam: the imperial powers were Spain, Portugal, Hapsburg, Ottoman and Mughal. As traders, Britons had to deal with empires, but were not themselves representatives of an imperial mission.

The idea, as found in the early discourses of colonization, that colonization as an accompaniment to 'trade' (and vice versa) is a form of liberty morphed, eventually, into the fully-fledged ideology of 'free trade' in the service of an imperialism that, in the British conceptualization of it, nevertheless remained associated with liberty, a process of ideological transfiguration that was so effective that, as Jennifer Pitts has shown, the scepticism of late eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers such as Edmund Burke, Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham towards imperialism had, by the time of James and thence John Stuart Mill, been transformed into an imperial zeal that could not only accommodate the seeming contradiction between empire and liberty but appear to dissolve it altogether (2005).³ David Armitage (2000) has traced in detail the ways in which this transition happened through the course of the eighteenth century, and it was the figure of 'trade' that proved to be the crucial, alchemical category through which an empire of liberty could be rhetorically brought into some form of coherence. Drawn as they were to classical models and precedents through which they thought through political concepts and ideas, early modern and eighteenth-century English intellectuals were inevitably aware of Sallust's account of imperial overreach as the reason for the collapse of the Roman Republic. The obvious conclusion was that imperialism and liberty were invariably at odds. At the same time, however, British overseas territorial possessions were becoming ever larger such that, according to Armitage, the phrase

³ Duncan Bell (2016), although somewhat critical of the specifics of Pitts' account, nevertheless concurs with the overall argument. See also Uday Singh Mehta (2018), which also offers a similar overall argument but with slightly different emphases to both Pitts and Bell.

'imperialism' becomes self-consciously associated with 'Britain' for the first time in the mid-eighteenth century (2000, p.8). Pride in this emergent empire wrestled with received wisdom of the threat to liberty posed by imperialism. This necessitated a redefinition of the term 'empire' and it was achieved by drawing on the earlier positive associations gathered around 'colonization', particularly its association with 'commerce' and 'trade' for these would enable the expansion of the British 'empire' without the military over-extensions that had so bedevilled the Roman exemplar and (given that by the late eighteenth century, the Spanish, Ottoman and Mughal empires were clearly in decline) more recent imperial polities. It is trade, then, that mediates and supervenes the opposition between empire and liberty; an empire based on trade offers a path to (imperial) glory that does not succumb to corruption, decadence and the loss of liberty (Armitage, 2000, p.142). A further important distinction was drawn between the nascent British empire and these other examples: they had over-reached militarily because they had expanded through territorial conquest; that is, they were land-based; the British empire had grown out of its trading colonies, plantations and outposts, and these had all been enabled by Britain's mastery of the sea. The British empire would be different from the others because, as Armitage pithily puts it: 'Empire could only be compatible with liberty if it were redefined as maritime and commercial, rather than territorial and military' (p.142). Since the British empire would be an 'empire of the sea', 'not only would empire be at last reconciled with liberty, but liberty would be its essential foundation' (pp.142-3). It is worth quoting Armitage's final assessment in full here because it shows just how much the entire structure of an early imperial imaginary, as Britannia initially sallied forth to 'rule the waves', is rehabilitated and reproduced in contemporary Brexit discourse by right-wing historians such as Lambert as much as by Brexit-supporting politicians and journalists:

The vision of a maritime trading empire, and the diagnosis of England's fitness to capture it, identified the success of a trading nation with the liberty of its government, distinguished territorial conquest from the unlimited potential of empire upon the sea, and thus laid the foundations for a blue-water policy designed to enrich England while defeating universal monarchy in Europe. A typology thereby emerged which would hold sway for at least half a century. The Bourbon monarchies were ambitious for universal monarchy, their designs lay on the continent of Europe, their monarchies were absolute, and

hence they could not flourish as commercial powers. England (and, after 1707, Great Britain) was a free government, which encouraged rather than depressed trade, and its destiny lay in the empire of the sea rather than in territorial conquest, which was a danger to liberty itself, as well as a diversion from the nation's true commercial interests.

(p.144)

By the time of the Opium Wars, a liberal imperialism fully reconciled with, and committed to the extension of liberty across the globe had become firmly rooted in the British (and especially English) social and political imaginary (Pitts, 2005; Bell, 2016). Amitav Ghosh, in the second and third instalments of his magisterial *Ibis Trilogy*, accounts for the formation of the colonies of Singapore and Hong Kong as part of a process whereby these south-east and east Asian footholds can serve both as conduits for the trade between Imperial China and British India, and launchpads for military offensives, all in the service of liberty (Ghosh, 2011, 2015). This trilogy of novels is particularly acute in showing how colonization was, materially speaking, a fundamental and necessary vehicle for the operation of 'free trade' and, conversely, how 'free trade' was integral to the ideological justification of colonialism. The emphasis on 'Free Trade' in the Brexiteer lexicon cannot but carry this historical freight.

But part of the polysemy, the doubleness, of the trope of (de)colonization is the way in which it also indexes the decolonization and dismantling of Britain's imperial infrastructure as a rupture in this narrative, and Brexit discourses surreptitiously imbricate this other sense of (de)colonization in a euphemistic, some might say dog-whistle, register that alludes to the perceived consequences of decolonization (in this disruptive sense) on Britain's self-perception, self-identity and 'way of life'. The 'pastoral' nostalgia (yet another!) that Ankhi Mukherjee (2018) finds lurking within the affective economy of Brexit, in a reading of Roger Scruton's imagining of it, has been ably documented in relation to class and the ways in which a conservative tradition has imagined the consequences of industrialization, urbanization and the emergence of radical working-class politics within the urban proletariat. But, as Edward Said has shown, even as sensitive and rich a documentation of this persistent sense of loss as Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), has been blind to the ways in which race and post-war immigration presses upon the structures of feeling that constitute post-imperial Britain (Said, 1994, p.14, p.77). The task, then, is to connect these two narratives of loss: of the pastoral Arcadia, and of imperial pre-eminence. Brexit is one such point of connection.

As I have noted elsewhere (Mondal, 2018), this period of decolonization coincided with the period in which Britain's imperial decline is accompanied by its gradual incorporation into the European project and eventual accession into the EU, and it might perhaps be speculated that this coincidence is precisely what determines the Brexiteers' retrospective re-telling of this period in terms of Britain's 'colonization' by Europe, which is itself sutured to the sense that decolonization's consequences have led to the 'reverse colonization' of Britain itself by those it once colonized.

Louise Bennett, the Caribbean poet, coined this phrase with her tongue rather firmly in her cheek in order to satirize the racist essentialism that accompanied popular British attitudes towards post-Windrush non-white immigration (Bennett, 1982), but certain strands within post-imperial British life and thought have taken it at face value, as a fact that offers a premise for an argument: both Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech and Thatcher's reference to 'swamping' during the 1979 general election campaign articulate this anxiety over a perceived 'reverse colonization', anticipating of course the Brexiteer discourse deployed during the referendum implicating the EU in the overwhelming of Britain by Others, both European and non-European, and prefiguring the later characterization of the EU as the agent of Britain's abject colonization (which is always-also-and-already the 'reverse colonization' to which the discourse of British post-imperial nationalism initially referred).⁴ Hence, the narrative of colonization by the EU, which, in its doubleness, is also the narrative of 'about to become colonized' by the EU, is invariably – if euphemistically – racialized even if, on the surface, concern with EU migration appears not to be.

There is, I think, a connotational link between the language of 'swamping' directed towards non-white immigration, and the idea of 'encroachment' by the EU on Britain's sovereignty, mediated by a pastoral 'idea of England ... threatened with extinction' (Mukherjee, 2018, p.80). With regard to race the mediation works in two ways; on the one hand, it associates the disruptive black presence in England (principally) with the infernal space of post-industrial urban centres, with an added rhetorical layer of associations drawn, as Paul Gilroy showed in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (2002), from the archive of racialized colonial tropes. On the other, it secures the whiteness of this pastoral space by registering the disruptiveness of any black presence

4 There is also a connotational adjacency to the use of the term 'reverse racism' (and, latterly, the linkage of this term to the notion of 'political correctness') by the New Right from the late 1970s onwards, as it critiqued and hollowed out the discourses of anti-racist movements that had mobilized in the name of non-white migrant communities to Britain from the former colonies (see Barker, 1981).

outside those urban centres (Loh, 2013). Within the affective economy of this pastoral vision, the authentic Arcadia that has been successively corrupted by capital, immigration and the EU is signalled as a 'white' space, a subterranean bedrock that has been overwritten by layer upon layer of coloured ink, first formerly commonwealth black, thence EU blue.

Which brings me to the rise of racist populism as the principal register of Brexit discourse. It is a truism, now, that the cold rationalism of Remain arguments about economic damage did not stand a chance against the affective mobilizations of the Leave campaigns, even though this alignment of Remain with reason, and affect with Leave does not really hold (Meek, 2019); much of the Remain strategy depended on the generation of fear of the economic consequences of Brexit, such that it was characterized, with egregious hypocrisy on the part of the Leave-supporting media, as Project Fear. Moreover, there was cold-blooded calculation on the part of Leave, not least in the sophisticated use of social media algorithms to generate a snowball of emotive messages leveraging fear of otherness in order to mobilize the vote. Nevertheless, the Leave campaign was a paradigmatic example of affective politics, in which "politicians...do not have clear, complex policies but rather seek to embody moods" (Eaglestone, 2018, p.95). As with Brexit, so with Trump, and even if it is not true that democratic politics is now all about affect whereas before it was reasonable and rational (how much more affective a politics can you get than the Conservative election poster in 1964 warning 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour?'), then it is certainly the case that today's digital instruments of affective politics have magnified and multiplied messages that neither require nor seek argumentation but rather cathect and charge inchoate social energies into subliminal, barely perceptible and sometimes explicit messages of fear and loathing.

But even so, there is, in theory, no necessary reason why the principal register of Brexit should have become a populist racism. Indeed, there are some prominent Brexiteers (who have now largely departed the stage or have struggled to attract the limelight) who have been frankly appalled by this register and its mobilization on behalf of Brexit (one thinks of Douglas Carswell and Daniel Hannan, principally).⁵ It has been the core of my argument so far, such as it is, to provide plausible reasons as to why this has become the case – and, indeed, it is notable that both Carswell and

5 Dorling and Tomlinson (2019) have noted that several of the leaders and campaigners of both Leave campaigns were born and raised in distant outposts and former colonies of the erstwhile British empire. Many of them were not quite so appalled by the racism of the campaign, indeed some, like Arron Banks, were instrumental in racializing the referendum.

Hannan were both born and initially raised in two of Britain's former colonies, Hong Kong and Kenya, such that it is probably the case that they are psychologically animated by the project of rehabilitating the kind of colonial nostalgia that I have identified above, one built on the resonances of an early association of free trade and liberty.

But, of course, this racist populism is not unique to Britain. It is even more prominent on the continent, within the very EU from which Britain is departing. It would thus appear to be the case that racist populism is fast becoming the only common ground between the political cultures of the EU and Britain. And this should not surprise anyone, because colonization, racism and the consequences of decolonization are not part of the story of Britain only, but of Europe as a whole. As Marlow puts it in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, 'all Europe went into the making of Kurtz' (Conrad, 1983, p.86), that archetypal figure of the colonial imaginary that is the diabolical double of the 'good' colonial figures that populate, for example, Kipling's short stories.

And the narrative of decolonization is a narrative that encompasses all of Europe too, not least because the racial imaginaries of European countries have also had to reckon with and acknowledge the tumultuous consequences of decolonization, both in terms of the position of European economies in a world economic system that has shifted, not radically but certainly perceptibly and significantly, away from Europe (and even, now, the United States) towards Asia; and in terms of the arrival, within their own boundaries, of peoples from territories they either governed during their own imperial periods, or, latterly in the form of refugees, from the poisonous legacies bequeathed to entire regions by colonial governments as they carved out enormous swathes of territory for mutual European benefit and rivalry. Put simply, decolonization inaugurated a structural readjustment in the global economy and in geo-politics that is playing itself out, at one level, through the epiphenomena of Brexit and the emergence of racist populism.

To elaborate on this a little, if we move from the European to the global scale, then both the EU itself and Brexit are responses to the problematic of decolonization, the provincialization of Europe and the 'West' – that historic if nevertheless unfinished and glacially slow re-orientation of the world economy and readjustment of global hierarchies of power.⁶ Europe has, through the consolidation of its economies into an EU, managed to hold off the economic consequences of this readjustment for a period, but it has increasingly struggled to do so; meanwhile, to paraphrase Churchill – which, given his commitment to racist imperialism

⁶ The phrase is, of course, taken from Dipesh Chakrabarty's highly significant book, *Provincializing Europe* (2009).

as well as greater European co-operation, seems both appropriate and somewhat ironic – the skies of Europe are indeed darkening with pigeons coming home to roost: the refugee crisis is merely the most extreme and visible symptom of the EU's increasingly feeble attempts to contain the consequences of the problematic of (de)colonization.

Fleeing the consequences of structural underdevelopment, and the redrawing of political territorialities on behalf of the administrative convenience of colonizing powers, the ensuing economic and political disturbances of erstwhile colonies have led to unprecedented migrant flows, both forced and unforced: the other side of the refugee crisis is the hollowing out of many societies in the global South by the need for skilled as well as unskilled migration from former colonies in order to stem the inevitable decline in productivity within Europe arising from an ageing population; this is the economic 'pull' that is the accompaniment to the 'push' of war, famine, disease, unemployment and poverty. Inevitably, the arrival of these dark-skinned others has disrupted the psychogeography of race as established by colonial and imperial racism, and its constitutive role in the formation of European nation-states (Lentin, 2004; Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991), which simultaneously draws attention to and calls into question the twin privileges of European universalism and whiteness.

The Europe-wide response, of course, has been articulated through a racialized register that, for a brief interlude, was muted but never absent, and has now broken out into the open on the continent and in these islands. Brexit is therefore merely a British-inflected variant of this pan-European or Western reflex to reassert white privilege through the discursive hierarchies of racism. These are the morbid symptoms that Gramsci identified as the inevitable accompaniment to periods of interregnum, when the old order is dying but a new one is yet to be born. Where this will lead is anyone's guess, but the signs are not good.

On the other hand, if decolonization offers a frame within which to make sense of these large scale changes in economy, society and politics, as well as providing at least a significant key to unlocking the mystery of the affective structure mobilizing Brexit, then it can also perhaps be used as a frame within which to re-consider the idea that Brexit is an unprecedented event. It is certainly unprecedented in the history of the European Union, but that is a very small and very recent frame. Shift the frame, enlarge it somewhat spatially and elongate it temporally, and one can see that decolonizing nations were themselves seceding from a customs union and free trade area, a kind of Brexit *avant la lettre*, also animated by affects structured by nationalism, claims for sovereignty and

a desire for independence. The fates of many post-colonial nations, politically speaking, do not augur well for the consequences of Brexit. For one thing, what the painful history of decolonization tells us is that when the high hopes of independence are thwarted, as they invariably are, the result is a kind of bitter resentment and an increase in chauvinism and xenophobia, nativism and sectarianism, a rise in political and religious fanaticism.⁷

The rise of modern Islamism, for example, is a fiendishly complex story that is prone to gross oversimplification, but it is surely no coincidence that modern Islamism emerges, plurally, with the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 partly as a result of the inevitable disillusionment that accompanied the illusory 'independence' granted to Egypt in 1922; from the withering of the promise of Pakistan as a Muslim nation-state; and also the CIA-induced overthrow of the democratically elected Mossadeq-led socialist government in Iran, and the subsequent consolidation of the Shah's reactionary and brutally authoritarian regime by the US and its allies. Likewise, the emergence of Hindutva as a major political force in postcolonial India, or of the highly chauvinistic Sinhalese nationalism in Sri Lanka, or of Duterte's authoritarian populism in the Philippines, cannot be distilled into a singular causal explanation, but in each case a potent factor is the succumbing of mythic plenitude, of wholeness, contained in the promise of 'independence' to the realities of dependency and interdependency, with their attendant compromises, adjustments and defeats. Unlike the real colonization and brutal exploitation of these former colonial territories (with the exception, of course, of Iran, which was never formally colonized), the reduction of Britain to the status of a colony may be, as I have argued, merely a phantasmagorical figure in the rhetorical assemblage of the Brexit imaginary, but so too are the sunny uplands promised by a soon-to-be-independent Britain setting forth to rule, once more, the waves.⁸ Brexit nationalism shares with many of these thwarted anti-colonial nationalisms not only an entangled history, but also a desire for something that will not, indeed perhaps cannot, come to pass. What will happen then? It may behave many in Britain to stop navel-gazing and take a look around at what

7 This would be presumably inserted into the recurring series of disappointments, thwarted dreams and fantasies and 'betrayals' that Fintan O'Toole has so acutely dissected in his discussion of Brexit in *Heroic Failure* (2019).

8 Note also the egregious recent comparison of Brexit Britons to African slaves rising up against their masters made by Ann Widdecombe, the erstwhile Tory MP and minister who now sits in the European Parliament as a Brexit Party MEP (see Scott, 2019). The word 'chutzpah' does not begin to cover it.

has happened elsewhere in the last half-century: it is not a story that is alien to them. Indeed, to paraphrase one of the characters in Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* (1992), the trouble with the British is that most of their history happened overseas – but they have willfully forgotten or, indeed, never even noticed it (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019).

By way of conclusion, let me say explicitly that by offering these thoughts on Brexit and (de)colonization I do not mean to imply that Brexit can be reduced to this, as if it were a singular causal explanation. History simply does not work like that. I am aware that, as Robert Eaglestone and Fintan O'Toole (among many others) have noted, the Second World War plays perhaps as big if not bigger part in the Brexit imaginary as does Empire – but the empire, as Santanu Das and Michael Ondaatje have reminded us, was as deeply implicated in that war, and the one that preceded it, as Europe (Ondaatje, 1993; Das 2011, 2017, 2018). I am aware, too, that class is ever-present, but this does not mean that class trumps race, or that the logic of capital in the era of post-colonial globalization is more important than the logic of capital in the period of colonization: all these stories intersect, run into one another, form the series of local to global scales that bear down on this thing called Brexit and all that it means and can possibly mean. As I said at the beginning, Brexit involves a scattering, a kind of centrifugal force that runs in several directions all at once. It therefore presents a challenge to thought of a quite unusual, if not quite unprecedented, kind. It is not a challenge that can be met by the peculiar pleasures of parochialism.

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