REVISITING THE GOLDEN AGE: BREXIT, MIGRATION AND THE RHETORIC OF NATIONAL IDENTITY[1]

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Abstract: *The Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 put in motion a series of complex negotiations resulting in inevitable impasses, some of which have not been resolved even now that the UK is finally out of the EU (most palpably the so-called Northern Irish Protocol). While debates are still ongoing, there seems to be little to add to either side's remarkably set stance at this stage. This article discusses the ways in which migration played a decisive role in the run-up to Brexit and beyond, and explores they ways in which the somewhat ambiguous concept of the Golden Age is closely tied to the thorny issues of sovereignty lodged deep within the evolving discourses of British national identity, recalling the moments in which this inched perilously close to the rhetoric of what Umberto Eco termed "Ur-Fascism." Only recently, the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, has proposed a new bill to curtail illegal immigration in order to "take control of our borders." Thus, the old Brexit-winning motto of the Leave campaign, "Take Back Control," is still prominent in the ruling Conservative agenda, somewhat unsurprisingly, while the rhetoric of a projected Golden Age looms large over the UK's promised political and economic future.*

Five years ago, the Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 delivered a decisive vote which rendered the preceding forty-three years of British membership in the EEC, later the EU, history. Some nine months and a party leadership reshuffle later, following the swift resignation, on 24 June 2016, of David Cameron, the architect of the referendum and leader of the Remain campaign, the then incumbent Prime Minister, Theresa May, triggered Article 50 on 29 March 2017,

thereby initializing the official process of the United Kingdom formal withdrawal from the EU. Originally, the withdrawal process was supposed to take two years. All in all, it took nearly five laborious years of negotiations, misunderstandings and delays, both sanctioned and accidental or purely procedural, and no less than three Prime Ministers, for Brexit to formally come to pass – first on 31 January 2020, with a transition period in place for the following eleven months to allow yet more time for negotiating a deal between the EU and the UK. Finally, and after yet more frustrating months of gridlocked talks and looming uncertainties of an ever-more-likely no-deal or so-called Hard Brexit, a rushed and, as it turns out, not particularly advantageous post-Brexit trade deal with the EU was signed by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, on Christmas Eve 2020, a mere week before the end of the transition period. With the Union Jack projected across the façade, fireworks over Downing Street blasted off Britain's brave new dawn at 11 pm GMT on 31 December 2020.[2]

Over the period of the five years since the Referendum, headlines on both sides of the English Channel, and across the Irish Sea and the Atlantic, were heavy with pro- and anti-Brexit rhetoric.[3] This profoundly polarised polemic has spanned the gamut of possibilities from the Eurosceptic to the Europhile, one painting in bright colours Britain's brave new world of possibility unshackled by European bureaucracy, the other none the less enthusiastic about the inevitable downfall and decay of a once-great world power, whose latest isolationist misstep represents a case in point in its post-imperial history. These rhetorical campaigns sketching the two possible extremes of an uncertain UK future, are, to a large extent, still ongoing, making the whole process an ideal subject for the satirists of the day, from newspaper cartoonists to bloggers and stand-up comedians. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the rhetoric of the Golden Age is particularly rife in the former Leave camp, now representing the Conservative leadership and current UK government. As we shall see, this particular rhetoric is a tell-tale sign in current affairs, harkening back to a purely fictional ideal out of time. As one of the most prolific popular commentators of Brexit, the *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O'Toole, explains in the introduction to his latest collection of Brexit-related articles, aptly titled "Before the Golden Age": "the whole point

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[2]   For a summary of the so-called transition period of 2020, see "Brexit: What You Need to Know about the UK Leaving the EU," *BBC News*, 30 December 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-32810887 (accessed 12 May 2021).

[3]   For a comprehensive overview of Brexit developments, past and present, see the regularly updated Euronews site by Alasdair Sandford: "Post-Brexit Guide: Five Years Since UK Vote, Where Are We Now – and How Did We Get Here?" *Euronews*, 23 June 2021, https://www.euronews.com/2021/06/23/brexit-draft-deal-first-of-many-hurdles-to-a-smooth-exit (accessed 23 June 2021).

of the Golden Age is that it is outside history. It exists merely as the ideal from which humanity has been expelled forever."[4] In this manner, the trope of the Golden Age is particularly prone to populist misappropriation.

If we think of just the numbers, the British electorate being 46,501,241 strong at the time, the Leave campaign scored the majority of 17,410,742, leaving Remain lagging behind at 16,141,241.[5] In many ways, it is fair to say that the Remain minority, representing that fateful 1.3 million short of half the votes, became a number so widely belittled by the winning Leave side as to render the whole affair biased in everyday political debate from the very beginning. While Scotland voted overwhelmingly to Remain in the EU at 62 to 38 percent, closely followed by Northern Ireland at 56 to 44 percent, Wales voted 53 to 48 percent to Leave, leaving England, with its vast majority of votes, to score the highest pro-Leave portion, at 53 to 47 percent.

These stark differences between the electorate's majority choices in England and the rest of the UK have since become more complex, with the lack of delivery on various key vote-swaying Brexit promises resulting in an even more pronounced antipathy towards the UK's withdrawal from the EU in Scotland and, in view of the ongoing tensions due to the unresolved border issues, in Northern Ireland, while Wales (and parts of England currently let down by post-Brexit uncertainties, such as Cornwall and other fishing and hospitality strongholds) are also ostensibly changing their minds about the benefits of Brexit. The state of the United Kingdom is, as a direct result of these Brexit-related divisions and rising tensions, decidedly disunited at present, and critics warn of an even more pronounced movement towards disunity. Most palpably and logically, this means a more direct path to Scottish Independence, closely followed by a rising devolutionist/nationalist movement in Wales, while the embers of the Troubles are glowing again in Northern Ireland.

All this is to a large extent a direct result of a markedly Anglo-centric vein of Conservative UK leadership. As Hudson Meadwell has summarised it, "Brexit is an English-centric phenomenon in which Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales appear as complications or afterthoughts. The sole constitutional voices in the Brexit process are English-dominated […]. Neither Northern Ireland, nor Scotland nor Wales are constitutionally empowered to express a voice on the matter of EU membership."[6]

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[4]   Fintan O'Toole, Introduction to *Three Years in Hell: The Brexit Chronicles* (London: Head of Zeus, 2020) v-vi.

[5]   "EU Referendum: Results," *BBC News*, 24 June 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results (accessed 12 May 2021).

[6]   Hudson Meadwell, "It's the English, Stupid! Brexit Is an Expression of English Nationalism," *LSE* Brexit Blog 2015-2021, posted by Roch Dunin-Wasowicz on 6

"Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration": Brexit, Euroscepticism and English Nationalism

Whatever the motives of the Leave campaign were we are yet to fully discover, even though such a hypothesis breaches perilously close to conspiracy theories. While we may never quite know what was behind it all, the common consensus within reason lists the following main explanations for the occurrence of the Brexit referendum and its result: 1. internal Conservative Party politics (one of whose long-term symptoms was the increasing prominence of the UKIP party and its resulting key role in the Leave campaign),[7] 2. British exceptionalism, 3. increasing EU bureaucracy. Behind all these, however, looms the fundamental issue largely responsible for the referendum and its outcome, and that is undeniably migration. Migration has shaped and rather unpleasantly sharpened the tone of European (and American) politics across the board in the last decade or so, and we can discern a particularly edgy and regressive rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of the 2015 migration wave, used by various radical nationalist parties (unsurprisingly) as well as mainstream conservative or so-called centrist parties (rather surprisingly).

As James Dennison and Andrew Geddes argue in the conclusion to their comprehensive article on "Brexit and the perils of 'Europeanised' migration": "It is by now well established that immigration and free movement played a key role in Britain's decision to leave the EU."[8] Attentively, they summarise the issues at hand as follows:

> immigration did not make the United Kingdom considerably more Eurosceptic. Instead, the debate over Europe, which had already hardened in the UK by the late 1990s and was always more pronounced in both the elite and electorate than elsewhere in Europe, became fused with a public debate on immigration, which became considerably more Europeanised throughout the 2010s. This far more explosive issue transformed passive predispositions about Europe into active predictors of vote choice and party membership, giving the Conservative Prime

August 2019, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2019/08/06/long-read-its-the-english-stupid/ (accessed 12 May 2021).

[7]   For more detail on UKIP, see https://www.ukip.org/. The front-page pledge speaks for itself: "UKIP is the only truly patriotic political party in the United Kingdom" (accessed 12 May 2021).

[8]   James Dennison and Andrew Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration," *Journal of European Public Policy* 25, no. 8 (2018): 1150.

Minister little hope of winning a general election without somehow reassuring some Eurosceptic, anti-immigration voters.[9]

It is ironic that for all the outstanding British concern with immigration/migration, throughout its forty-seven years of European membership, "the UK also opted out of key components of the EU migration and asylum acquis."[10] On the other hand, one decision by the Blair government is largely accepted as one of the chief reasons why the British political and public understanding of migration changed so dramatically in the ten years preceding the Brexit referendum: "to allow immediate access in 2004 to the UK labour market for the ten accession states, including eight central and eastern European countries was truly momentous. Of western European member states, only Ireland and Sweden made a similar choice."[11]

Euroscepticism is a long-standing British concern. Interestingly, while in the run-up to the UK's joining of the EEC in 1973, the tabloids such as the *Daily Mail* were jubilant and celebratory, looking forward to Britain's new European involvement, in the run-up to the Brexit referendum, and largely throughout the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, the tabloids were pushing hard-line Eurosceptic headlines, from the cartoonish mockery of EU-sanctioned straight bananas to the alleged loss of British sovereignty in the bureaucratic jungle of the EU. The most effective of these Eurosceptic headline campaigns was, again, the issue of migration.[12] This stark reversal of popular opinion on the UK's membership in the EU between 1973 and 2016 is already the subject of many studies. This article is in turn interested in the ways in which Brexit constructed a particularly English sense of an imagined community, and how this imagined community ostensibly positioned itself in need of being set free from the stringent constraints of foreign rule.

Any discourse of nationalism gains momentum in the time of crisis, and there have been at least two major global crises in the run-up to the Brexit referendum: the 2008 market crash followed by years of EU-sanctioned austerity measures, and the European migrant crisis of 2015. While the former can be said

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[9]   Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1150-51.
[10]   Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1142.
[11]   Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1142.
[12]   For the stark contrast between the *Daily Mail* front page of 1 January 1973 (the UK joining) vs 1 January 2020 (the UK leaving), see "Britain and Europe: How the Papers Changed," *BBC News*, 1 February 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-the-papers-51335251 (accessed 12 May 2021).

to have laid the ground for the wider electorate's dissatisfaction, which found an all-too-easy release in the Yes/No question of the 2016 Brexit referendum, the latter played a key role in both the Remain and the Leave campaigns; it is fair to say that both these European crises have been part and parcel of the rhetorical strategies deployed during the Brexit campaigns. As Afua Hirsch explains in her book on the complexities of British xenophobia:

> The Brexit campaign took people's fears – about housing shortages, austerity and cultural change – and harvested them. It didn't overtly concern itself with the facts – making among other things the patently false claim that £350 million per week spent on the EU would, in a post-Brexit Britain, be ploughed into the NHS. […] For white Europeans, the feeling of discrimination may have been a new, post-Brexit sense of threat. But the descendants of imperial subjects had been feeling the hate long before.[13]

The consolidation of assorted prejudice and dismay at the current state of affairs across the board found a welcome vent in the form of a common culprit – the EU – and one of its key constituent policies it became collated with in the British public mind during those decisive years and months leading up to the Referendum, namely its openness to migration.

As Jonathan Charteris-Black explains in his 2019 study *Metaphors of Brexit: No Cherries on the Cake?*:

> A primary purpose of political language is to produce collective identities that coalesce around a shared set of ideals, values and beliefs. There are two contrasting rhetorical strategies for achieving the goal of such identity formation practices: the first is to express values that *the group is positively committed to* […]. The other strategy is to express *beliefs that the group is opposed to.*[14]

The "Us group framed its positive ideals in the language of Patriotism and the sacrosanct character of the nation" in contrast to the "reasoning and intuition that framed what it was opposed to in the language of Distrust and Degradation. The War frame is based on the moral foundations of Loyalty/Disloyalty,

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13 Afua Hirsch, *BRIT(-ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (London: Vintage, 2018) 276.
14 Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of Brexit: No Cherries on the Cake?* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 103.

Care/Harm, and Sanctity/Degradation."[15] Charteris-Black further argues that "the pro-Leave campaign created group identities by framing its messages in the language of 'War and Invasion,'"[16] citing Tim Shipman, whose bestselling 2016 book *All Out War: The Full Story of Brexit* "frames the Referendum campaign entirely through metaphors of war."[17] As Dennison and Geddes propound, "the two pro-Leave campaigns – the official Vote Leave and the breakaway, unofficial Leave.EU – explicitly used anti-immigration rhetoric throughout the campaign," although "[t]here was almost no variation in voting intention in the EU referendum in the six months prior to the vote."[18] While British "attitudes to EU membership had been fairly stable since 2008 and increasingly correlated with attitudes to immigration, so that, partially because of the immigration issue, few citizens changed their preferences during the EU referendum, […] British Election Study data show that Leave voters were considerably more anti-immigration than Remain voters and that 'immigration' and 'sovereignty' were the two issues most cited by Leave voters as motivations for their vote choice."[19]

Part and parcel of the sovereignty issue are the concepts of patriotism, in the British case closely linked to post-imperial nostalgia. As Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon explains in his study of British Euroscepticism, the "nostalgic rendering of Britain's past" stems, at least to some extent, "from a desire to return to the 'golden age' of British history – an age that was defined by British imperialism, even if present-day Eurosceptics do not call the Empire by name."[20] The Brexit campaign triggered renewed interest in the highly advertised issue of sovereignty, activating nationalist rhetoric in the guise of patriotism. One of the most blatant examples was the use and abuse of Shakespeare during the Brexit campaign. This is hardly surprising, given the historic moment at stake as well as the timing of the referendum vote, concurrent with the Bard's 400th anniversary in April 2016. Many studies have since been devoted to this and related phenomena of Brexit rhetoric.[21] As Fintan O'Toole explains in his 2016 article on

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[15]   Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of Brexit* 103-104.

[16]   Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of Brexit* 104.

[17]   Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of Brexit* 104; see also Tim Shipman, *All Out War: The Full Story of Brexit* (London: William Collins, 2016).

[18]   Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1146-47.

[19]   Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1147.

[20]   Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Continental Drift: Britain and Europe from the End of Empire to the Rise of Euroscepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 468.

[21]   Chris Bryant, "This Sceptic Isle Would Most Displease Pro-Europe Shakespeare," *The Guardian*, 21 April 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/21/how-love-eu-count-william-shakespeare-remain-brexit (accessed 12 May 2021); Emma Smith,

the abuses of the national classics in Brexit rhetoric: "Leave campaigners cling to 'Jerusalem' and 'This scepter'd isle'. They've misunderstood both […] Right-wing English nationalism is on the rise, but its cultural foundations are very weak. Even its top texts don't mean what nationalists think they mean."[22] O'Toole, who has since published two volumes of collected articles about Brexit,[23] goes on to point out that both these texts "raise the most problematic question of backward-looking nostalgic nationalism: when, exactly, was this golden age of Englishness you want to return to?"

While immigration and sovereignty are manifestly the two key issues at stake when it comes to Brexit, both are closely tied to the concerns of national identity and its formative discourses. It is worthwhile to pause and briefly think about the particular issue of sovereignty at stake here, because it is anything but simple in the case of the UK. The blurring of the terms English and British has been fairly widely established in English discourse – to cite a famous example, George Orwell's essay "England Your England," originally commissioned by the Ministry of Information in 1941 as part of the home-front war effort: "we call our island by no less than six different names, England, Britain, Great Britain, the British Isles, the United Kingdom, and in very exalted moments, Albion."[24]

"May As Polonius, Gove As Cassius: Is Brexit a Shakespearean Tragedy?" *The Guardian*, 12 April 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/12/brexit-tragedy-worthy-of-shakespeare-emma-smith (accessed 12 May 2021); Paweł Kaptur, "'This Sceptred Isle'. Reflections on Shakespeare and Brexit," *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* 72, no. 4 (2020): 562-73. For parallels with the 1957 Treaty of Rome and the 1534 breach with Rome, see Willy Maley, "Spenser and Europe: Britomart after Brexit," *Spenser Review* 47, no. 3 (Fall 2017), http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/47.3.42 (accessed 12 May 2021).

[22] Fintan O'Toole, "Culture Shock: Brexit Nationalism Is on the Rise, But Its Cultural Base Is Crumbling," *The Irish Times*, 1 July 2016, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/culture-shock-brexit-nationalism-is-on-the-rise-but-its-cultural-base-is-crumbling-1.2706895 (accessed 12 May 2021).

[23] On the author's comprehensive political commentary on Brexit, its many procedural peripeties and possible ramifications, see Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London: Head of Zeus, 2019); *Three Years in Hell: The Brexit Chronicles* (London: Head of Zeus, 2020) – this latest book's epigraph cites Jonathan Swift's "The Art of Political Lying," showing that current top political satire is alive and well, and openly in touch with its canonical predecessors.

[24] George Orwell, *The English People* (London: Collins, 1947). For more detail on the issue of Englishness, see Krishan Kumar, *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); Ailsa Henderson and Richard Wyn Jones, *Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Orwell, of course, does make a point of distinguishing not only the four constituent nations of the UK and their particular attitudes to the blurring of English/British, alongside the economic North/South of England divide, as well as the general rich/poor divide across the board. However, in Orwell's essays, as Michael Gardiner explains in the Introduction to his recent edition thereof,

> [c]rucially, England resists definition. It inheres in the fleeting and the instinctual, and its resistance to definition is not only an emotional appeal but it is also a counterweight to European political systems. This appeal to an anti-systemic England has been recalled by politicians ever since, since it allows them to claim popular instincts always fitting within Britain's uncodified constitution.[25]

This is certainly key to the Brexit processes and ramifications we are tracing here. With the EU standing opposite to these "uncodified" British ideas of statehood and governance, the two traditions are set on a collision course, especially if helped along by eager politicians ready to exploit these underlying concerns. Dennison and Geddes propose that "[p]erhaps the key cause of Brexit was an interaction between Britons' relatively strong latent Euroscepticism, on the one hand, and post-1992 European integration and post-2004 free movement, on the other."[26] As Alasdair Sandford explains about the aftermath, the referendum

> followed decades of increasing hostility to the European project, which enforced the supremacy of EU law in certain areas and whose 'freedom of movement' principle led to millions of EU citizens moving to the UK to work and settle. Other factors cited as having had an influence were a rise in nationalist sentiment, particularly in England, as well as austerity and frustration with traditional politics. The outcome has fed into a wider debate over the role of the nation-state and the rise of populism in an age of globalisation.[27]

Moreover, some argue that the decisive discursive step towards the overall success of the Leave campaign was the fact that the "[o]pponents of the EU had successfully labelled EU citizens as 'EU immigrants'"[28] during the Brexit campaign and beyond.

[25]   Michael Gardiner, ed., *Orwell and England: Selected Essays* (London: Macmillan Collector's Library, 2021) xii.
[26]   Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1148.
[27]   Sandford, "Post-Brexit Guide."
[28]   Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1147.

Related to these concerns is the idea of Brexit as the forging of a new British – but quite starkly English – community, consolidating a landslide Conservative victory in the General Election of 2019:

> 'Get Brexit Done.' That was the slogan repeated on every billboard, pamphlet and doorstep during the Conservative Party's campaign for the U.K. election. […] when the results came through overnight, it was clear those three words had helped win Boris Johnson's party an overwhelming majority, with at least 364 seats in parliament up from 318 two years ago, the party's biggest victory since the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher.[29]

The following rhetorical cadence – from the Leave campaign's winning slogan "Take Back Control," via Theresa May's mantra after activating Article 50, "Brexit means Brexit," to the Conservative party's winning General Election resolution, "Get Brexit Done" – speaks for itself. In five years, the British top political rhetoric has progressed from imperative to imperative, via that famous tautology, inherently intertwined with the concerns of Brexit, which has become the benchmark or bane of every British Prime Minister since 2016.

"Ur-Fascism": Promises and Pitfalls of Populist Propaganda

In a famous essay which bears uncomfortable parallels with our subject-matter, Umberto Eco reflects on the creeping complexities of "Ur-Fascism" and its constituent signs as follows:

> To people who feel deprived of a clear social identity, Ur-Fascism says that their only privilege is the most common one, to be born in the same country. This is the origin of nationalism. Besides, the only ones who can provide an identity to the nation are its enemies. Thus at the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology there is the obsession with a plot, possibly an international one. The followers must feel besieged. The easiest way to solve the plot is the appeal to xenophobia. But the plot must also come from the inside.[30]

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[29]   Billy Perrigo, "'Get Brexit Done.' The 3 Words That Helped Boris Johnson Win Britain's 2019 Election," *Time Magazine*, 13 December 2019, https://time.com/5749478/get-brexit-done-slogan-uk-election/ (accessed 12 May 2021).

[30]   Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, 22 June 1995, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/ (accessed 12 May 2021).

While this is certainly true of the UKIP campaign, Eco further mentions the following signs: "impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning" – in this context, it is worthwhile to recall the famous tautology "Brexit means Brexit," adopted by the May government and later Boris Johnson.[31] Amid the Leave.EU camp, it was especially the UKIP campaign which sailed perilously close to fascist rhetoric, crowned a week before the referendum by the unveiling of the infamous "Breaking point: The EU has failed us all" anti-migrant poster, which liberal journalists picked up on at the time, in the UK and abroad – for instance, *The Washington Post*, "New Pro-Brexit Ad Gets Linked to Nazi-era Propaganda": "Critics claimed that the poster was a sign of UKIP's and the pro-Brexit crowd's latent bigotry and racism. Guardian journalist Jonathan Jones likened Farage's stunt to the infamous 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech delivered by Enoch Powell, a conservative politician who inveighed against immigration."[32] Where Powell's infamous speech targeted the Caribbean immigration wave, the so-called Windrush Generation,[33] with a clear racial intolerance agenda and biblical visions of white-anger violence should Britain continue to embrace mass immigration, Farage's poster was targeting the latent xenophobia in the current British population, linking these to the rising anti-Muslim sentiment, fear of the 2015 migrant wave which had arrived in Europe from the Middle-East as a result of the Syrian conflict, and capitalising on the irrational threat of the so-called Islamic State in the process.

While the UKIP poster was duly condemned by mainstream media across the world, the damage of its simplistic impact on a certain level of the electorate, feeding off latent fears, ethnic prejudice, and the grossly skewed sense of EU migration policies presented by the Leave campaign in general, was already done. As Dennison and Geddes summarise it:

> The history of British immigration policy meant that the Leave campaign slogan of 'take back control' resonated because this had long been the aim of government policy. The same could be said of the infamous and

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[31] For detail, see, e.g., Mark Mardell, "What Does 'Brexit Means Brexit' Mean?" *BBC News*, 14 July 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36782922 (accessed 12 May 2021).

[32] Ishaan Tharoor, "New Pro-Brexit Ad Gets Linked to Nazi-era Propaganda," *The Washington Post*, 16 June 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/16/new-pro-brexit-ad-gets-linked-to-nazi-era-propaganda/ (accessed 12 May 2021).

[33] Nicknamed after one of the ships which brought the first settlers from the West Indies to the UK between 1948 and 1971.

misleading 'breaking point' poster unveiled by Nigel Farage one week before the referendum, which showed a queue of refugees crossing the border from Croatia to Slovenia in summer 2015. The campaign exposed the unwillingness of sections of the electorate to subordinate the desire for immigration control, as part of a perceived balance between numbers and integration, to the EU's free movement framework, which necessarily undermines that balance as the cornerstone of the previous British political consensus on immigration.[34]

Moreover, the legacy of Conservative politicians inciting ethnic intolerance was recently taken up by "the Tory peer and David Cameron's former pollster, Andrew Cooper" as follows: "Since the Brexit referendum the Conservative party has too often looked and sounded like an English Nationalist movement."[35] He might have been referring to the infamous BBC interview incident in July 2015 in which David Cameron referred to "a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain."[36] On the back of the Brexit campaign, this kind of xenophobic discourse has unfortunately seeped from the far-right margins of nationalist bigotry into mainstream political language.

When it comes to evocations of the Golden Age during the Brexit campaign, the parallels painstakingly drawn were not only discursive but also performative in a more plastic sense. The playfulness and borderline idiocy of the most devout in both camps resulted, among other things, in a barge flotilla confrontation on the Thames: a day before unveiling the Breaking Point poster, Nigel Farage "led a pro-Brexit flotilla up the Thames, only to be met by a rival fleet mobilized by the 'Remain' camp"[37] led by none other than Sir Bob Geldoff.[38] This kind of populist campaigning leaves little doubt as to some underlying sense of these antics hearkening back, perhaps unconsciously, to the British Golden Age proper, namely the Elizabethan, considering the *navalis* aspect of this peculiar

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[34] Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1141.

[35] Cited in Michael Savage, "Fifty Years On, What Is the Legacy of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' Speech?" *The Guardian*, 15 April 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/14/enoch-powell-rivers-blood-legacy-wolverhampton (accessed 12 May 2021).

[36] "David Cameron Criticised over Migrant 'Swarm' Language," *BBC News*, 30 July 2015, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33716501 (accessed 12 May 2021).

[37] Tharoor, "New Pro-Brexit Ad Gets Linked to Nazi-era Propaganda."

[38] Robert Booth, "Nigel Farage and Bob Geldof's Rival EU Referendum Flotillas Clash on the Thames," *The Guardian*, 15 June 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/15/nigel-farage-bob-geldof-rival-eu-referendum-thames-flotillas (accessed 12 May 2021).

performance, but also the wider faux-naval implications hearkening back to the latent idea of a British Golden Age, namely the Empire.

The issues of British fisheries and British waters, ostensibly at stake here, meanwhile continue, predictably, to make headlines, as the entire Fisheries sector struggles with post-Brexit red tape and lack of viable treaties to deliver the Brexit boon of restoring British fishing freedoms – a Leave-campaign promise which famously swayed Cornish voters during the Referendum, for instance. The Golden Age of British satire continues in the post-Brexit aftermath in the case of the Fishing Wars. The confrontations between the French and the British fishing fleets around the Channel Islands, recalling the infamous 1970s armed skirmishes before the UK joined the EEC (the so-called "Scallop Wars," as well as the "Cod Wars" between Iceland and the UK in the 1970s),[39] have provided particularly rich satirical material, prompting a recent parallel with Gillray's 1793 cartoon of the naval blockade during the first year of the war with revolutionary France. While Gillray's famous cartoon features an anthropo-morphic map of Britain fashioned into a strident John Bull farting ships into the mouth of the face that is the map of France, titled "The French Invasion, or John Bull bombarding the Bum-Boats,"[40] Steve Bell's modern post-Brexit legacy, titled "The French Bumvasion: or Boz Bumbull Sending in the Bum-Boats" features the counties of the British Isles transformed into a landscape of bulging buttocks, including a faintly disguised bum-portrait of Boris Johnson's unruly mane (Steve Bell's signature shorthand for the current Prime Minister), sending in the "bumboats," HMS Severn and HMS Tamar, to defend "Gallant Little Bumsey" in a recent fishing standoff around Jersey.[41]

The current "Sausage Wars," an unexpected consequence of the Northern Irish Protocol (once called the Irish Backstop), represent yet more food for the

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[39] Jim Pickard, "UK Puts Royal Navy on Standby to Deter European Fishing Boats," *The Financial Times*, 11 December 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/b2b6352f-a6fc-470c-9360-402d918ed780 (accessed 12 May 2021). For the Scallop Wars, see Joe Sommerlad, "Scallop Wars: A Brief History of British and French Fishermen Musselling in on Each Other's Catch," *The Independent*, 30 August 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/scallop-wars-britain-france-fishing-rights-english-channel-history-a8512871.html (accessed 12 May 2021).

[40] John Gillray, "King George III ('The French Invasion; – or – John Bull, Bombarding the Bum-Boats')," National Portrait Gallery, https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw63257/King-George-III-The-French-invasion---or---John-Bull-bombarding-the-bum-boats (accessed 12 May 2021).

[41] Steve Bell, "A New Map of Bumland and Macronia," *The Guardian*, 7 May 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2021/may/06/steve-bell-on-boris-johnson-sending-patrol-boats-to-jersey-cartoon (accessed 12 May 2021).

renewed golden age of British satire.[42] As Dennison and Geddes presciently point out in their 2018 article, anticipating the various concerns of a post-Brexit British future: "While the reasons for Brexit are primarily identitarian and post-functional, the results will test the extent to which electorates and governments are willing to put these concerns above 'bread and butter' functional concerns."[43] More palpable in the hospitality and logistics sectors than when it comes to the sausage standoffs and fish fracas, Dennison and Geddes warn that "the UK cannot rapidly change the labour market model that has developed over the last 30 years and to which migrant labour has been fundamental."[44] This has since become only too painfully obvious in the many outcries of various British economic sectors, starting with the lack of seasonal labour on farms, resulting in unharvested, wasted produce,[45] and in the hospitality sector,[46] to permanent shortages in the NHS, and among long-haulage drivers, from supermarket suppliers to bin collectors.[47]

John Bull in a China Shop: A Brexit Parable

A recent exhibition at The British Museum, titled "I Object" (September 2018 – January 2019), co-curated by the well-known satirist Ian Hislop, long-term Editor of *Private Eye*, provided some unique Brexit-related material worth pausing at for a moment, to critically assess the hard-to-define sense of national belonging encapsulated in physical objects and their patriotic aura.

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[42]   Tom Edgington and Chris Morris, "Brexit: What's the Northern Ireland Protocol?" *BBC News*, 30 June 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-53724381 (accessed 30 June 2021).

[43]   Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1151.

[44]   Dennison and Geddes, "Brexit and the Perils of 'Europeanised' Migration" 1141.

[45]   Sam Corbishley, "Fruit Farming 'on Brink of Collapse' As Brexit Causes Shortage of Pickers," *Metro*, 12 June 2021, https://metro.co.uk/2021/06/12/fruit-farming-on-brink-of-collapse-as-brexit-causes-shortage-of-pickers-14759484/ (accessed 12 June 2021).

[46]   This is particularly ironic in the case of the markedly pro-Brexit entrepreneur Tim Martin, whose nationwide chain of low-budget public houses, Wetherspoons, has recently struggled with the lack of EU workforce, a comment he promptly denied: see Dave Burke, "Brexiteer Wetherspoons Boss Says UK Needs More EU Workers to Tackle Staff Shortage," *The Mirror*, 2 June 2021, https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/brexiteer-wetherspoons-boss-says-uk-24233628 (accessed 2 June 2021); "Wetherspoons Boss Denies Facing Shortage of EU Workers," *BBC News*, 2 June 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-57314682 (accessed 2 June 2021).

[47]   Dave Harvey, "Brexit and Covid Cause Big Jump in Pay for Lorry Drivers," *BBC News*, 2 July 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-57656327 (accessed 2 July 2021).

Since its invention, or rather adaptation of the prized Chinese "Nanking" originals, by Thomas Turner, an English porcelain-maker, in 1779,[48] the Blue Willow pattern had become, through transfer-printing mass production during what was quickly to become the golden age of English Staffordshire porcelain production, "perhaps the most widespread of domestic designs."[49] In fact, it had become such a household name and symbol of established countrified Englishness as to provide the allusive frame for George Meredith's satirical opus, *The Egoist* (1879), where the protagonist, Sir Willoughby Patterne, is a playful echo of this symbolically endowed household item.[50] As Mayo portends, "In Meredith's day, as in our own, Willow-ware was undoubtedly the best known variety of English china."[51]

Form, more expressive and intricately interwoven with what has traditionally been called content than simply a mould or container, shares certain characteristics across the variety of possible media. Somewhat similarly to the sonnet form, once solely devoted to the prescribed concerns of an intimate lyric, which gathered political edge already in Shakespeare's hands (Sonnet 66 being perhaps the most expressive example), and later in Donne, Milton and the Romantics (Shelley in particular), the Willow Pattern – which has, over the past 250 years, represented a particularly English kind of stability[52] – has recently been invoked in a strikingly political manner in the "Brexit Ware" collection. Harriet Coles, the artisan potter behind the Brexit Ware project, explains its history as follows: "Brexit Ware emerged from the early days after Britain's referendum on EU membership in June 2016. […] Brexit Ware is blue and white, bone china transferware, made in the United Kingdom, with one exception – the egg cups. The whiteware for these is made in China representing new trading alliances after Brexit."[53] (Fig. 3). As Coles elaborates, "Brexit Ware has evolved

[48] "Willow Pattern," *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/Willow-pattern#ref235738 (accessed 20 August 2019).

[49] "Caughley Ware," *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/Caughley-ware#ref135295 (accessed 20 August 2019).

[50] For detail on the significance of the Willow Pattern in Meredith's novel in terms of plot, see Robert D. Mayo, *"The Egoist* and the Willow Pattern," *ELH* 9.1 (March 1942): 71-78.

[51] Mayo, *"The Egoist* and the Willow Pattern" 72.

[52] For more detail on the literary and cultural significance of the Willow Pattern, see Patricia O'Hara, "'The Willow Pattern That We Knew': The Victorian Literature of Blue Willow," *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 421-42.

[53] "Brexitware: Projects & Process," *Brexitware*, https://www.brexitware.com/about (accessed 12 May 2021).

with the times. I use different traditional English china design templates – such as the willow pattern and Minton's fortune-telling teacup – for inspiration to record the events of Brexit as they unfold."[54]

It is particularly apt to revisit an object imbued with such symbolic value of traditional significance and cultural ubiquity as the Willow Pattern to raise awareness of issues arising from current political affairs such as Brexit. The new, politically charged pattern combines the traditional art of automated pattern-printing with the manufacture origins of porcelain-making. By updating the Willow Pattern with Brexit symbolism, with particular emphasis on the ramifications of the 2015 refugee crisis (figure of mother and child in the defunct Calais camp), which to a large extent served as an excuse to stir the British political debate towards increasingly undignified and self-serving xenophobic ends, ultimately helping the Leave campaign prevail, the artist has succeeded in bringing a fresh perspective and an innovative medium to the largely tired debate about Brexit, bringing in elements of the golden age of satire (the figures on the bridge with sledgehammers representing the Leave campaigners destroying the bridge between Britain and Europe). The crockery also shows the plight of EU citizens living in the UK, a boatful of them leaving Britain's shores and heading back across the English Channel (Fig. 2).

Fig.1. The original Willow Pattern. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

[54]   "Brexitware: Projects & Process."

Fig. 2. The Brexit Ware Willow Pattern. Source: brexitware.com.

Fig. 3. Brexit Ware egg cups. Source: brexitware.com.

The Brexit Ware project raises captivating questions about the objectification of national belonging, the evocation of a Golden Age via the values of the Victorian household as a widely traditionalised British institution, coupled with nostalgia for some form of stability. All this is both evoked by and simultaneously satirised in the Brexit Ware items exhibited as part of Ian Hislop's "I Object," serving as both commemoration of particular historical events and a running critical commentary. As the "I Object" exhibition highlighted, "challenging authority is an essential ingredient in the development of human civilisation. Across millennia, it has acted as a driving force behind social and political change […] the evidence for which exists in various forms, not least in a number of surprising physical objects."[55]

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[55] "I Object," *British Museum*, https://www.britishmuseumshoponline.org/i-object-i-an-hislop-s-search-for-dissent.html (accessed 12 May 2021).

Conclusion: Vestiges of a Golden Age?

In his latest Brexit book, *Three Years in Hell*, Fintan O'Toole writes that Boris Johnson, as a result of the Tory landslide 2019 General Election victory, "had, in a real sense, created a new country" which is "certainly not the United Kingdom"[56] but rather a strange new-fangled English domain which disregards its fellow remaining union nations, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. As O'Toole notes, the UK's withdrawal from the EU marked "a project in which an unacknowledged force (English nationalism) was channelled into an undefined transformation (a Brexit that had no realistic relationship to an achievable reality)."[57] According to O'Toole, Brexit is both a "literally and metaphorically escapist" venture. As he aptly highlights, "the whole point of the Golden Age is that it is outside history. It exists merely as the ideal from which humanity has been expelled forever."[58] As we have seen, the rhetoric of the Golden Age is in the English case closely bound to insularism, patriotism-come-nationalism laced with unacknowledged imperial nostalgia, and often features the appropriation of heritage icons such as Shakespeare, Churchill, or even Henry VIII, whose momentous breach with Rome, the Act of Supremacy of 1534, has now come to be read as the first Brexit moment in British history – as in a *Times* article marking "Brexit Day," 30 January 2020: "there is really only one event in Britain's past that compares, in economic, ideological, cultural and political magnitude to today's departure from the EU and that is Henry VIII's spectacular withdrawal from Europe."[59]

The appeal of hyperbolic rhetoric seems to be regrettably irresistible at present. It is indeed remarkable how often the trope of a Golden Age features in Boris Johnson's speeches, such as this Prime Minister's Statement on priorities for the government of 25 July 2019, gearing up to the General Election campaign: "in 2050 […] we shall be able to look back on this period – this extraordinary period – as the beginning of a new golden age for our United Kingdom."[60] In this speech, Johnson opens with the pledge to deliver Brexit as swiftly as possible

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[56]   O'Toole, Introduction to *Three Years in Hell* iii.
[57]   O'Toole, Introduction to *Three Years in Hell* iii-iv.
[58]   O'Toole, Introduction to *Three Years in Hell* v-vi.
[59]   Ben Macintyre, "Brexit Day Is Historic – Only the Reformation Compares," *The Times*, 31 January 2020, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brexit-day-is-historic-only-the-reformation-compares-f0flnpwbw (accessed 12 May 2021).
[60]   Prime Minister's Office, "PM Statement on Priorities for the Government: 25 July 2019," 25 July 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-priorities-for-the-government-25-july-2019 (accessed 12 May 2021).

(which was then still thought to be 31 October 2019) "for the purpose of uniting and re-energising our great United Kingdom and making this country the greatest place on earth." Indeed, according to Johnson, "By 2050 it is more than possible that the United Kingdom will be the greatest and most prosperous economy in Europe – at the centre of a new network of trade deals that we have pioneered."[61] So much for the rhetoric. The proof is in the pudding, as they say, and so far, with the added pressures of the global Covid pandemic, Brexit has not delivered much more than a series of complications to an already troubled existence, and we have yet to see a faint gleam of that promised Golden Age.

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[61] Prime Minister's Office, "PM Statement on Priorities for the Government: 25 July 2019."

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