

I came to Barcelona from the UK with the over-inflated and exotic view that I would be more politically stimulated here, that politics in my home country (this was pre-Brexit) was dull and business-like, that ordinary people there didn't discuss politics whereas across the shore in Europe they did. Yes, I know that technically we are European and that it's ridiculous to speak of the geographical continent, and at that time, Union that we are a part of, as something 'other'. But welcome to British exceptionalism, I've had to do a lot of deprogramming, and you can see where it's taken us..

So far in this column I've been talking about 2016 when I first moved here and the subsequent quagmire of complex identity confrontations I faced. My inner to outward projecting 'self' no longer mattered, my Mediterranean side was erased, and my whole being sucked into the tractor beam of that identity monolith: el guiri. I've spoken about how I was met and processed by the local population and the sense of being apart and othered that ensued, looping back to affect how I view myself. I've mentioned the outside looking at me, and because that had been such a profound experience it took some months to really see how complex it was on the other side too. As I look back at the muddled, hamfisted, clumsy language that I used in social and professional situations at the time I can say it's a charming underprepared innocence when really it's just unforgivable ignorance on the behalf of someone who claims to be interested in politics and other cultures. I was not well versed in the 'Catalan situation' or anticipating the temperature of the Catalunya I encountered in those initial 2016-2018 years and I certainly wasn't alone. However, as people reacted and corrected my misdemeanours over the months I came to hear distinctions and codes, invisible to me at first but slowly becoming discernible. Friends and foe, a nation and region consumed.

So let's situate ourselves in the now, in 2020 with a pandemic that has crescendoed to drown out everything else including the climax of Brexit. I am somewhat desensitised to Brexit. I have a Greek passport which insulates me from any personal inconvenience and I had already shed some tears and shown indignation back in 2016 and I had felt that those feelings had naturally ebbed away as reality sunk in. Even if at first I seem emotional and idealistic, I am a pragmatist and although painful, it was clear to me that the process of leaving would be long but it would certainly conclude in a full Brexit, with fried eggs on the side. I started to observe the course of events only through slatted fingers until finally burying my attachment to the topic under an acceptable guise of 'cold hard analysis' that I would provide through my Youtube channel. Like any emotional mechanism worth its money I actually ended up believing I was now immune to the emotional trappings of Brexit, the personal linkage, and was merely interested from a strategic and current affairs viewpoint.

However the potent mix of a Christmas Eve under a pandemic, coupled with not having visited home for a year and reading Twitter to see the most mundane words, repetitive messages, the slogan of Boris Johnson's 'Get Brexit Done' now turned into the past simple: we got Brexit done, finished me. A 'deal' had been made, the ordeal was over. Just like that, I had known it was coming, I had accepted it, Brexit was boring, the same insignia day in day out, Churchill trending every Sunday morning. It had been so background and yet when it arrived the impact of how tremendous this was hit hard, how seismic a decision and direction my home country had taken. And in that moment I felt my heart break again and I cried, the facade of the last 4 years was shattered and the truth exposed, the event and all it entailed had always been too big to process.

In the course of Brexit I have had many assumptions of my home country finally broken, the strings holding together an impossible story breaking and the 'global Britain' that BoJo bangs on about now exposed. I don't know how much of Brexit is nationalist but its current runs through and it's uncomfortable. This is framed as sovereignty and national pride triumphing over globalist internationalism, not unlike Trump's America First; Bannon et al are chums with Vote Leave and Boris. So it confronts so much of the commonwealth humanitarian post empire outreach Britain that had been constructed, whether we ever believed that or not, how do they align?

Whether or not your 'side' is able to count Brexit as a victory, the division has blighted the UK and created a palatable nastiness that I can't feasibly imagine many people are immune to. I voted to stay in the EU but did not back many Remain based initiatives after the referendum result. The reason I abandoned attempts to campaign for reruns of the referendum was in part because so much of the noise with that narrative was essentially reducing the 'other side' to stupidity. I am not saying there weren't smear campaigns and unfair exposure to Russian bots during that referendum and the narrative of Brexit has always promised an impossible dream wrapped up in rhetoric. That being said, there was so much less noise, and less focus on how this seismic unpredictable shock had happened right under the Prime Minister David Cameron's nose, who had voted the opposite way. It then became a wrestling match between the two sides in the following years of fake news and division rather than an attempt to build social cohesion and common ground for political progress. A dichotomy of Remainers by now dubbed 'Remoaners' and Leavers/Brexiteers.

On the one hand the nationalist current of Brexit is disturbing and has been shocking to behold; some of its main proponents saying terrible and divisive things about our neighbours in continental Europe and beyond. On the other hand the lack of bridge building and elitist smug satisfaction from Remain at the devastation that Brexit will cause is unworthy of support. The poorest in Britain will bear the brunt before any future 'wealth' Brexit will unleash so don't call those of them who voted for whatever, and I stress, rational reason to leave, stupid.

Having arrived here in January 2016 and the referendum being in June 2016 I did shelter and feel thankful I didn't have to see screaming headlines everyday demonising 'Europe' and whatever twaddle it was representing that day. Although they're supposed to generally be talking about the institution, I know that people personally and statistically have received more outspoken racist and intolerant abuse since the referendum. The late Jo Cox MP was murdered beforehand by a white man shouting 'Britain First'. These are just like the uncontrollable ugly tentacles of any nationalist movement in history.

However, as time passed, my brain switched off to Brexit in the way that I have described and the by now multiple attempts by Theresa May to pass the Withdrawal Agreement through Parliament, my awareness of the climate here grew. Well duh...! I lived in Gracia and had more than my fair share of contact with people through the local community, business associations, and professional workplace who would make pronouncements and actions I found entirely intolerant and a little aggressive. From the lower end of harmless rejection of other cities in Spain, like Valencia, that I had saved up to visit for the weekend to patrolling language and to outright statements of hostility to other groups like Argentinians, and those from Southern Spain, Madrid, Tarragona, Hospitalet...

This experience here culminated in a conversation with an Irish teacher acquaintance of mine who worked at a school in Besos. He liked his job and the students very much but had also mentioned some of the general difficulties a lot of them faced outside of school in their home life and community. He recounted a moment to me where he felt uncomfortable at school in the staffroom with the other teachers. They had been talking about politics and current affairs and like in some workplaces the people leading the conversation seemed to hold similar views. They spoke about the urgency for independence and the republic and how people like the parents of these kids, from other places, were too stupid to know what's going on. I asked again if he meant 'stupid' to check if this was really the adjective they had used. Yes he said they repeatedly called the parents stupid for not understanding independence and he was upset by it.

I'm not saying one or other is the same but you've got to admit the nightmare of a home country with Remainers calling Brexit nationalists from working class backgrounds stupid for wanting to leave the EU to now experiencing the reverse in my host country and have Catalan independentists calling parents in Besos stupid for not wanting to leave Spain. I went down Alice's rabbit hole where empathy is missing wherever you go. Bones festes!