

**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..**

A lot of this column speaks about the nuances and contradictions I observe in a city that prides itself on 'inclusivity' and 'openness'. I think it's time that some of my own British identity had a reckoning; it's only fair.

Countries, territories and peoples are often viewed through stereotypes and generalisations, it just happens. Some of these stereotypes are painted in a positive light and others hang around like a bad reputation. We always think of stereotypes as unwelcome labels, put on us by the external, that managed to stick. However, I want to talk about the ways we view ourselves, the mythical characteristics we give our collective identity and when that becomes an unquestioning idea of what we are defined by as people.

I've always thought I'm not patriotic in the slightest, I'm a Londoner who is more at home with the Union Jack Flag of the UK, if I had to pick, than the St George's Flag of England, which is usually a mark of white English nationalism. I'm ashamed of the UK's behaviour internationally having directly created and contributed to humanitarian disasters across the globe, as well as internally, as Britain pursues policies to impoverish its most vulnerable whilst demonising them at the same time. We never lost our Victorian streak.

But how did I really view my country and national identity? I saw the UK as having an inflated sense of self with an aggressive and immoral foreign policy and as being deeply interested in business and economic affairs above social and political issues. I had also come to normalise the view that the British are 'polite' and tolerant, if also superior and ignorant. I despised the 'Little England' type of attitude where everyone cares about their own castle and nothing much about society, but I also balanced that with a positive side believing that it led to less friction between communities and more freedom from abuse of power. Knowing that the UK had an evil colonial history I seemed to still concurrently hold the conception that its liberal ideals of tolerance and the rule of law meant there was much that was decent about the country I belonged to.

This had all been the easy part; what I hadn't realised was that I hadn't probed, questioned or criticised the 'positive' side of what I thought my 'Britishness' stood for. I was more than willing to offer up the bad parts, but I still held onto the 'good' almost unquestioningly. I had preconceptions and hadn't ever noticed they might not be all that true. I thought the UK was, on the whole, immune to some of the political pathologies in other countries, and that certain abuses were impossible due to the 'type of country' it is and the system it has. This seems to be a revised version of the old 'civilised vs savage' trope I had subconsciously internalised from our colonial past. These exceptions I carved out for my country and my associated national identity seem ridiculous, naive, and craven on looking back.

For example with the subject of racism, which of course I knew existed at home, there were fringe parties like Britain First and other such movements that were anti-Muslim and anti-immigration. We'd had the brutal racist murder of Stephen Lawrence, a young black teenager, in the 90s and as I left university the noise in the national press around Polish and Romanian workers increased, as Brexit started to loom more centrally in our political landscape. Yet despite this, I didn't ever call Britain a racist country and that was wrong. I hadn't yet come to learn about systems of white supremacy; my idea of my country was informed by a white identity within it, and I was from multicultural London and half Greek. I attended a Greek Orthodox Church and school and this all led to overstated ideas of tolerance and coexistence that I believed my 'inherently liberal' island was more inclined towards.

Brexit smashed a lot of my preconceptions about Britain. Although I don't want to fall into the Remain trap of reducing leaving the EU to bigotry, as there are many legitimate reasons to leave, it's also undeniable that Brexit opened a Pandora's box of resurgent Anglo-Saxon nativism, the only part of England I hadn't known or hadn't wanted to. I lost faith in what my fellow country-people stood for and it's just got more and more apparent as shown in the UK press response to BLM, and as Churchill trends weekly on Twitter, and the government race baits in the "Culture Wars". I felt a loss of identity but I just buried it deep and I didn't yet extend it to any other 'principles'.

The nail in the coffin happened this March as Parliament passed the second reading of a Policing and Crime Bill that is basically a sibling to the '*Ley Mordaza*' here. Using Extinction Rebellion and last year's BLM protests as excuses, and under the urging of the Metropolitan police, who advised 'taking the opportunity', the government proposed a wish-list for the most brutal crackdown on democratic freedoms the UK has ever seen. Up to 10 years imprisonment for vandalising a statue and legislation that means protests could be declared illegal and shut down for a host of arbitrary reasons such as 'public nuisance'. The law isn't serious; it doesn't stand up. Any final illusions had been laid bare about rule of law, liberal values, and due process. I felt grief and anguish. I'd always witnessed police in 'Europe' with fear as they walked the street with guns, whereas in the UK they're not 'armed'. The UK has also never required people to carry ID, which led me to indulge in thinking we had greater respect for the private individual \*eye roll\*. This May the government will be announcing, in the Queen's speech no less, compulsory voter ID for future elections in a country that doesn't have any form of compulsory ID as the elites foray into the voter suppression tactics of our transatlantic cousins.

Much like the Trump regime of 2016-2020 we, in the UK, have an ideologically extreme government with a shadowy network of unelected special advisors headed by a charlatan who will do whatever for whoever is financing his wallpaper. That being said I will not fall into the comfortable trap of believing this to be an anomaly any longer, that it's 'un British' and an exception to a more decent politics. In fact it is an extension of much that lives on that 'liberal' island, the facade has slipped and I will not be seduced any longer. I had clues since I first became politically interested in my teens, and the patterns to disprove your view are there if you can accept them. That Britain I 'lost' wasn't ever there, parts of it exist but they must be fought for and then nurtured; they are precious and under constant threat. The qualities that I once believed Britain to have are not inherent. My identity isn't just blessed

with these qualities simply because it is being repeated enough times unquestioning. They have to be practised. Hey, Catalunya, I'm looking at you too.