



Brexit: Psychological Cold Turkey Reframe

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This piece was first published on the IFF Blog and added an important psychological and cultural dimension to the discussion, linking it to other developments around the world. She argues that we are undergoing a fundamental crisis of identity and calls for a transformative response.

As a Brit who has lived in the US since the late 1960s I can't claim to have much of a handle on the political tides in the UK and even less on the slings and arrows of economic fortunes that swirl around the Brexit vote. But after four decades as a psychologist working with groups in cultures around the world, I do have a pretty good sense of human psychology.

In that light, watching the rise of Trumpism and open conflict between African Americans and police officials in the US, support on the rise for the far right in some European countries and now the Brexit vote, I have found myself increasingly troubled by what I see as fundamental failure of those in leadership positions to recognise, let alone understand, the scope of the crisis we are in.

In the UK, beyond the immediate political and governance shambles (largely created by the powerful themselves), elites and citizenry alike are ensnared in a larger and potentially far more consequential social disruption that has been gaining strength for decades. A cultural crisis is underway in all modern democratic societies where basic anchors of modern identity and social coherence are dissolving - perhaps irreversibly.

In the short run this turbulence is highly distressing and potentially dangerous. But on a longer view we could be experiencing what IFF members call a "cold turkey reframe", where shocks to existing conceptual frameworks are so acute as to challenge our taken for granted structures, creating space for new ideas, new institutions and new visions for the future of humanity. But I get ahead of myself.

On a personal level my working-class Yorkshire family has always been a pretty good barometer of the mood on the ground, especially in the North of England. Listening to their beefs, political loyalties, the choices they make and their aspirations for the future, I have come to understand their rising anxiety bordering on terror about a society that in significant ways has been changing around them faster than they can cope with or even make sense of.

I read the Brexit vote as a proxy for a whole spectrum of accumulating anxieties of indigenous Brits who were raised in a society that until very recently was remarkably stable and coherent. My own and my parents' post-war generations were encouraged to have national pride in "England", "Scotland", "Britain", expressed through our culture, art, song, story, food, mythology, pomp and circumstance and hymns we recognised after three or four bars. Social and personal identities were woven strand by strand from a myriad encounters within a British society that, whether realistic or overblown, knew who it was, what could be expected of it and what was acceptable. And for all but the very marginalized and mentally fragile that cultural stability translated into personal wellbeing.

No more

On the surface things might seem normal - cricket is still played on the green, Elizabeth still reigns, Scots still make the best whisky, Wimbledon is still the premier tennis venue - but the broader reality is that uncertainty and unpredictability have reached a crisis point. The Brexit vote has unnerved a generation who had opened up to the world and saw themselves as comfortably both British and European. When one listens to people talking about Brexit through the ears of empathy, beneath the anxiety the sense of loss is palpable.

Though much has been said about anger and even rage represented by both the Leave vote and the responses of the Remain camp after the vote, little has been said about the existential grief ordinary people were already feeling for a way of life that is dying around them through no fault of their own. Over the last 30 years or so the belief that the traditional British culture is no longer valued by leaders, business, academics or bureaucrats in Westminster and Brussels has become widely shared.

As one Brexit voter I saw interviewed remarked, "When you are taught all your life to be proud of your nation's vaunted history and its important place in the world - a founder of NATO and permanent member of the UN Security Council for instance - to be reduced to one identical star out of twelve on an anonymous blue flag really hurts." That he used the word "hurts" is revealing. He is speaking the language of feelings, not politics or economics. And the right response to feelings is empathy, not more argument.

Many feel they are very much on the losing side. They are losing good jobs, yes, but they are also losing their sense of place, of stable neighbourhoods and sovereignty.



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As Maslow reported, identity, meaning and coherence are basic necessities as important as shelter and food. In turbulent times we will do whatever is necessary to restore them, even if this comes with self-harm or a heavy dose of “othering” and demonizing those who have different histories and different views.

For many who have already been displaced or live close to survival's edge, a 10% drop in the standard of living because of Brexit is a bargain if it increases the sense of control over one's destiny. Cultural pride is also a factor at the other end of the economic scale. Comfortable Eurosceptics, people who are not likely to be much affected in the long run by an economic downturn in the UK, are already among the cosmopolitan elites, but they feel that the one thing global money can't buy - their hallowed British heritage - is being bureaucratized, standardised and purchased by the highest bidder. And in this they are not alone.

Psychotherapists and community workers know that when acute shocks occur more than one response is likely. Understandably some hunker down and try to keep things as they were, others may act out. But many - far more than we admit - are able to look the new circumstances squarely in the face and grow their way through them. They find colleagues, friends and settings where it is safe to talk about their emotional responses, where they can tell the truth, where empathy, non-judgmental acceptance and authenticity are the norm and where they can work through the existential tsunami. More often than not this process leads to new levels of consciousness, new appreciation of identity, and greater capacity to live with change than before.

A transformative response to the crisis would be to accept that established frames of late modern societies are no longer fit for purpose and no amount of top down processes or new management systems will work unless they release the resources available within today's diverse populations. We can look for the “positive deviants”, for “persons of tomorrow” - the people and organisations that are more than coping with the cultural crisis but who are actually thriving. Even in the midst of failing institutions,

innovative people who are secure enough within themselves to step out on to the edge and take a risk are inventing a future where local traditions can coexist with traditions in the process of being born.

Instead of returning to old refrains that don't work in the 21st century and trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, we must empathize with those who are losing their place, honour their grief, not argue, shame or ridicule them for what is a very human response to change and at the same time turn our face to the emerging future where both local and global psychologies provide the dynamism that can produce a humane and sustainable future for all, whether within the EU or not.

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