

The End of the United Kingdom

El final del Reino Unido

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Abstract

The United Kingdom government's response to the coronavirus pandemic and its longstanding pursuit of Brexit go hand-in-hand, testament to a ruling ideology that can best be described as a toxic combination of narcissistic nostalgia on speed and a deeply reactionary social darwinist view of the world. The roots of this bizarre ideology lie deep in an English exceptionalism, in part the engine, in part the legacy, of Empire. It is this exceptionalism that offers an explanation, or at least a partial one, of both Brexit and the UK's response to the pandemic, as well as a basis on which to speculate about the UK's future.

Key-words: Brexit, COVID, English Exceptionalism, Social darwinism.

Resumen

La respuesta del gobierno del Reino Unido a la pandemia del coronavirus y su dilatado compromiso con el Brexit van de la mano. De hecho, son la muestra fehaciente de una ideología dominante que debe describirse como la combinación tóxica de una nostalgia narcisista desbocada y una visión social del mundo profundamente reaccionaria y darwinista. Las raíces de esta extraña ideología yacen en lo profundo de una excepcionalidad, la inglesa, que es en parte el motor, en parte el legado del Imperio. Es esta excepcionalidad la que permite explicar, si no total sí al menos parcialmente, el Brexit y la reacción del Reino Unido a la pandemia, además de ofrecer argumentos para especular sobre el futuro del Reino Unido.

Palabras-clave: Brexit, covid, excepcionalidad inglesa, darwinismo social.

It's such an English attitude, this inability to forgive the rest of the world for not being England. – Frances Stonor Saunders, 'The Suitcase', part three, *London Review of Books*, 10 Sept. 2020, p. 26.

Brexit

Leaving the EU, whatever the economic cost and however delusional the idea of a Great Britain “restored” to its “former glory” by becoming some sort of global money-laundering facility, has not been a policy pursued only by the fundamentalist wing of the Tory Party and its fascistic outliers such as UKIP. It is a policy that is genuinely popular among a large section of the population, and for very many reasons.¹ The underlying reason, however, is already discernible in how the name of the country is understood, a name that is surely the most ironically misleading of any in the world: Great Britain. Up and down the country, and across the four nations that make up the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, people readily read ‘Great’, not as a geographical term, but as a normative one. Great Britain, once ruling over an Empire that covered vast areas of the globe, is no longer great and must be made so once again. The delusion that this is possible, let alone desirable, was shared even by the leadership of the short-lived Corbynist Labour Party. Why did Labour not oppose the Tory referendum in the first place? Why did it immediately accept the result of what was a merely consultative referendum as though its result mandated exit from the EU? Why did it not point out how historically and politically bizarre it was not to set any minimum turnout conditions for a constitutional referendum? Why did it accept 50% + 1 as a sufficient majority to leave? In short, why did it join with the Tory government in moving Article 50, the formal parliamentary trigger for leaving the EU? The answer is a gloomy indictment of the UK’s politics: it was because both Corbyn and his immediate ex-Communist Party advisors were themselves so deluded that they thought –apparently genuinely– that at least some minimal form of socialism could be built ‘in one country’. Yes of course the EU was, and remains, a fundamentally neoliberal organisation. But the chances of building socialism in an island off the North-West corner of Europe unconnected to the EU, and standing against much of the rest of the world, are even lower than those of beginning to move the EU edifice leftwards (however minimal those might appear). So, what is the source of this long-running, widely shared and utterly bizarre delusion? It is the same English exceptionalism that underlies Tory nostalgia for a “Great”

¹ Here is not the place for an extended analysis. Rather see the best among many other treatments: Fintan O’Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain*, London: Apollo, 2018, and *Three Years in Hell: the Brexit Chronicles*, London: Apollo, 2020.

Britain: whereas for the Tories it is largely a nostalgia for a mythical England, for the Labour fantasists it is a delusory notion that socialism can be built in an exceptional country, namely Great Britain – not that English imperialism doesn't spill over into Labour's own understanding of the imperial nature of the United Kingdom itself. That Brexit is very largely an English obsession, not a British one –with its roots in English imperialism “at home” going back to the 12th century– is crucial.² Certainly it is not one shared equally or with equanimity across the four nations of the United Kingdom. People forget too often and too easily that the English first colonised the nations of Great Britain and then made use of the now British people to help them set about Africa, south Asia and the rest. So, it should come as no surprise that attitudes to Brexit are markedly different across the nations of Great Britain.

Both major parties, together with a majority of people living in England, if perhaps not of those living in the other nations of this state, share this belief in an English exceptionalism. Unlike the fate of all other empires, the English empire is one on which the sun will never really set. The English, in concert with the major anglophone power, the USA, and three minor post-colonial bit-players –Canada, Australia and New Zealand– will continue to rule the world, not least on the basis of their common language, one which has already spread across the world like some linguistic virus, thereby proving the natural superiority of England, the English and of course their language. We shall rule through financial rather than military strength; and at the root of this anglophone alliance will remain the people who brought it all about, the English. It is this sort of nostalgically exceptionalist nonsense that underpins the delusional English demand for an impossible sovereignty “stolen” by the inferior races of Europe and in urgent need of reclamation from their clutches.

The Pandemic

The UK government's response to the Coronavirus crisis has been widely described as incompetent almost beyond belief. And that judgement is of course entirely right: at the time of writing, the country's COVID19 infection and death rates remain among the worst in the world, and its handling of the pandemic would be laughable if it weren't deadly, on some counts behind only the USA, Brazil and India. The March 2020 lockdown came too late. The ‘world-beating’ track and trace system promised for June 2020 collapsed before it ever got off the ground; Prime Minister Johnson's ‘moonshot’,³ the

² England first invaded Ireland at the end of the 12th century; conquered Wales in the 13th; and fought for several hundred years with Scotland before the Act of Union in 1707.

³ See Reuters staff, ‘UK PM Johnson vows “world-beating” track and trace COVID system’ by June 1, 20 May 20. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-britain-track->

putative solution to the June debacle, turned out to be sheer moonshine; at the time of writing the track and trace system –run by various multinationals with no experience of such systems rather than local public bodies with the knowledge and means to do it properly– remains a shambles;⁴ and only about 11% of those who should be in self-isolation actually are.⁵ How come that an apparently long-lived democracy that managed to conquer and exploit large parts of the world should turn out to be so monumentally incompetent in its response to the pandemic, with a Prime Minister ordering ventilators from a vacuum cleaner manufacturer and then promptly cancelling it,⁶ and awarding track and trace contracts to Deloitte, an accountancy corporation –among many other such absurdities?

The roots of this shitshow –to use an under-appreciated technical term– lie deep in English exceptionalism, the über-arrogant belief that all things English are, because English, the best of their sort: to give just a few examples, its system of “parliamentary democracy”; its concern for the best interests of its colonial subjects; Churchill’s war leadership; and its long-lauded incorruptibility.⁷ It is this that accounts for the government’s resolute, and resolutely racist, refusal to learn from others. As Devi Sridhar emphasises, we refuse to learn from the Vietnamese, Taiwanese or South Korean responses to the coronavirus crisis –or even from suitably white New Zealand; but then that is far away on the other side of the world, and anyway the Prime Minister is a woman.⁸ It is just impossible that inferior peoples –namely all those who are not English– should have a better handle

[idUSKBN22W1MW](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/09/coronavirus-testing-the-pm-fact-checked)’. Accessed 13 Oct. 20. See also Aamna Mohdin, Pamela Duncan and Niamh McIntyre, ‘Coronavirus testing: the PM fact-checked’, *The Guardian*, 9 Sept.20. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/09/coronavirus-testing-the-pm-fact-checked>. Accessed 13 Oct.20.

⁴ Josh Halliday, Peter Walker and Denis Campbell, ‘NHS races to reach 50000 Covid contacts missed in data blunder’, *The Guardian*, 5 Oct. 2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/oct/05/ministers-accused-of-putting-lives-at-risk-with-covid-data-error>. Accessed 13 Oct. 20. See also Gabriel Scally, ‘England’s three-tier system is an admission of failure’, *The Guardian*, 12 October 2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/12/englands-three-tier-system-is-an-admission-of-failure>. Accessed 12 Oct 20.

⁵ Chris Baraniuk and Matt Reynolds, ‘The government has known since June that most people aren’t self-isolating’, *Wired*, 24 Sept. 20. Available at <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/nhs-test-trace-isolate-data>. Accessed 13 oct. 20.

⁶ BBC, ‘Dyson Covid-19 ventilators are “no longer required”’, 24 April 20. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52409359>. Accessed 13 Oct. 20.

⁷ See George Monbiot, ‘If you think the UK isn’t corrupt you haven’t looked hard enough’. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/10/uk-corrupt-nation-earth-brexit-money-laundering?fbclid=IwAR33D-DftpZvp6imUV7yphZxNzY1pmeF8-C5PGF-XiZB2KfkvstxT-PqM>. Accessed 11 Oct.2020. See also Monbiot, ‘Rotten to the core’, *The Guardian*, 11 September 2020. Available at <https://www.monbiot.com/2020/09/14/rotten-to-the-core/>. Accessed 10 Oct 2020. For examples of the secrecy around the award of government contracts, see PA Media, ‘MPs launch legal action against UK government over Covid contracts’, *The Guardian*, 11 October 2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/oct/11/mps-launch-legal-action-against-uk-government-over-covid-contracts>. Accessed 11 Oct 2020.

⁸ <https://twitter.com/devisridhar/status/1285279070633197571> Accessed 11 Oct. 2020.

on controlling the pandemic than the exceptional English, who after all are by definition the best and the wisest of all possible people, as the historical record indubitably shows.

Just in case anyone is inclined to think that I am exaggerating, here is an extract from a speech by the UK Prime Minister on 3 February 2020, as the pandemic implications of the coronavirus were becoming clear:

we are starting to hear some bizarre autarkic rhetoric, when barriers are going up, and when there is a risk that new diseases such as coronavirus will trigger a panic and a desire for market segregation that go beyond what is medically rational to the point of doing real and unnecessary economic damage, then at that moment humanity needs some government somewhere that is willing at least to make the case powerfully for freedom of exchange, some country ready to take off its Clark Kent spectacles and leap into the phone booth and emerge with its cloak flowing as the supercharged champion, of the right of the populations of the earth to buy and sell freely among each other.⁹

What is there left to say?

English exceptionalism and social darwinism

It is important to emphasise that the same English exceptionalism underlies both the Brexit farrago and the Coronavirus disaster if we are to understand either. And it is of course no coincidence that the architects of the referendum and of the manner of its implementation –Dominic Cummings and his coterie, brought into government by Johnson as special advisors and exercising an unprecedented sway over the cabal of idiots he carefully constructed as his Cabinet– should also be the real drivers of the government’s response to the pandemic. For theirs is a crudely social darwinist understanding of the world, whereby culling tens, even hundreds, of thousands of people is regarded as an acceptable way of ensuring “herd immunity”. Today’s English nationalism, the contemporary expression of English exceptionalism, is fundamentally a social darwinist phenomenon, although its roots go back deep into British –and especially into English– history: these islands have remained uninvaded since 1066, after all.¹⁰ In brief, the fundamental idea is that of the survival of the

⁹ Boris Johnson, ‘PM speech in Greenwich, 3 February 2020’. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-in-greenwich-3-february-2020>. Accessed 14 Oct. 2020. For comment, see for example Opinion, ‘Gaslighting the virus’, *Bella Caledonia*, 17 Apr. 20. Available at https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2020/04/17/gaslighting-the-virus/?fbclid=IwAR2UXBq5xANuYhBTRPNms-TOGV-00_q652LXn0Q7BarZE1eT6ghEg3Uzhr8. Accessed 14 Oct. 20; and Fintan O’Toole, ‘The fatal delusions of Boris Johnson’, *New Statesman*, 1 July 20. Available at <https://www.newstatesman.com/2020/07/fatal-delusions-boris-johnson>. Accessed 13 Oct. 20.

¹⁰ It is perhaps ironic that the English social darwinist understanding of class should in the later

fittest, a phrase coined by Herbert Spencer in the mid-1860s. So those who have survived –and by extension those who are flourishing– are by definition fit to do so; whereas those who are not are unfit. As with, say, athletics, where the winners are by definition the best competitors, so in both individual and national –in this case, imperial– life. Doing well is all the evidence needed of the rightness of one’s doing well, since doing well is what shows that one is fit to do so. It is hard to imagine a better “justification” for imperialist conquest and exploitation: the ability so to exercise power proves “our” fitness to do so; whereas “our” victims, clearly unfit, deserve their biologically determined fate. And as with imperialism, so with neoliberalism, which after all expresses an especially raw version of the social Darwinist doctrine. It is here that neoliberal capitalism meets English exceptionalism, which brings us precisely to the present UK government, utterly committed as it is to a social darwinist understanding of the world (something that of course differentiates it from most previous varieties of Tory government).

So, the earlier story I offered about the profound incompetence of the UK government is not quite right. Certainly many of its members are almost laughably incompetent, from Johnson downwards. But Johnson chose his cabinet colleagues precisely on the basis of their incompetence, an incompetence that makes them unthreatening to him; and Johnson –himself an incompetent buffoon *extraordinaire*– was manipulated into position by the authors of Brexit. Why? Because incompetence is the best possible cover for an ideologically social darwinist campaign, since it immediately takes our attention away from what is structural, rather than contingent. Those in charge of the UK today are anti-statist fundamentalists; their commitment is to ensuring that the state acts, and is seen to act, incompetently, precisely in order then to be able to argue for the greatest possible shrinking of the state and the substitution for the state by private corporations. For if this view of society prevails, then it will have been shown to be fit to prevail by definition. Here as elsewhere, furthermore, the advice is to ‘Never let a serious crisis go to waste’,¹¹ a lesson clearly not lost on today’s social darwinist fundamentalists. The absence after months of promises of a functioning track and trace system, for instance, serves two interlinked purposes: the diminution of trust in state structures; and the pursuit of so-called herd immunity, its absurdity notwithstanding, in order to help bring about the survival of the fittest. How else to explain the government’s permitting the re-opening of the universities, which in the UK entails hundreds of thousands

nineteenth century chime in so well with its doppelgänger, the Indian caste system; and it is no wonder that the colonisers of India should have felt so comfortable there.

¹¹ Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*, London: Verso, 2013. The basic idea was earlier formulated by Naomi Klein in her *Shock Doctrine – The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, London: Penguin, 2008. It is inconceivable that Cummings hasn’t learnt from both.

of students moving away from home to university? Of course the result was going to be that the coronavirus would rampage through the country's university towns and cities. And of course the compliance, complacency and collusion of university managements was to be expected, with the result that as I write infection rates are shooting up exponentially up and down the country.¹² Doubtless this is indeed a matter of incompetence on the part of some. But that incompetence is a cover for the pursuit of "herd immunity" – a utilitarian conceit of the sort that is typical of social darwinist "thinking".¹³ We need to keep reminding ourselves that the logic of both social darwinism and utilitarianism are basically one and the same: whatever is, should be, else it wouldn't be; and as John Stuart Mill put it, the only evidence that something or other is desirable is that it is in fact desired.¹⁴

Thus as with Brexit, so with COVID19: only policy-based evidence is admissible. So, for instance, the responsible minister never even read the 2016 Cygnus Report,¹⁵ commissioned by the government itself, which concluded that the country was in no shape to deal with a pandemic, the consequences of which would be disastrous;¹⁶ and the government continues at the time of writing to block its publication.¹⁷ In similar vein, it ignored the clear advice of its own scientific advisors when they warned in September of the likely consequences of not imposing a series of 'circuit-breaking' lockdowns.¹⁸ Any evidence that runs against the "English genius" claim is to be suppressed and ignored. Else the logic of social darwinism would be shown to be the pernicious nonsense that it is.

¹² Niamh McIntyre, David Batty and Pamela Duncan, 'Fears grow student Covid infections will spread into local areas in England and Wales', *The Guardian*, 12 Oct 20. Available at

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/12/fears-grow-student-covid-infections-england-wales-will-spread-into-local-communities>. Accessed 12 oct 2020.

¹³ And let us not forget that Herbert Spencer was one of the classical utilitarians of the nineteenth century, as well as the begetter of social darwinism.

¹⁴ J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chapter 4.

¹⁵ Politics Live, *The Guardian*, 1 July 20: 'UK coronavirus: death toll in hospitals, care homes, and community at 26,097 – as it happened'. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2020/apr/29/uk-coronavirus-live-priti-patel-questions-response-covid-19-crisis-pmq-latest-updates?page=with:block-5ea94b108f08db9df42df6e6>. Accessed 14 oct. 20.

¹⁶ Bill Gardner and Paul Nuki, 'Exclusive: Exercise Cygnus warned the NHS could not cope with pandemic three years ago but "terrifying" results were kept secret', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 Mar. 20. Available at

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/28/exclusive-ministers-warned-nhs-could-not-cope-pandemic-three/>. Accessed 14 Oct. 20.

¹⁷ Jamie Doward, 'Whitehall told to release secret 2016 files on UK pandemic risks' *Observer*, 11 Oct 20. Available at

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/11/whitehall-told-to-release-secret-2016-files-on-uk-pandemic-risks>. Accessed 12 Oct 2020.

¹⁸ Ian Sample, 'Ministers told weeks ago to impose short lockdown or face "large epidemic"', *The Guardian*, 13 Oct.2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/12/englands-three-tier-system-is-an-admission-of-failure>. Accessed 13 Oct. 20. See also <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54518002>. Accessed 13 oct. 20.

The bad news and the good news

The bad news—at least for those living in England—is that, once the UK has abandoned EU structures more or less entirely, if not entirely *tout court*;¹⁹ and once the social darwinists’ power is consolidated, in part through an insistence on “herd immunity” as the way to respond to Covid 19; then the delusional hubris of English exceptionalism will find its apotheosis in both disasters. The outcome will be a Panglossian little England, shorn in short order of Scotland, probably Wales and even Northern Ireland; a deluded little England which, with wonderful historical irony, will become either little more than the 51st state of the USA or just a cold, wet version of the Cayman Islands.

The good news, however, is the same, but from the point of view of the non-English inhabitants of Great Britain; namely that the other nations of the UK will finally have thrown off the yoke of Englishness, and may have a future to look forward to, whether as independent nations or, in the case of Northern Ireland, as part of the Republic of Ireland.

And the even better news is that the EU will at last be rid of its most reluctant member, allowing it to deal with its problems without the succubus of English membership. But not only that: the example of little England’s departure will not signal more withdrawals, as some have feared. On the contrary: once people see the fate that awaits England, they will swallow whatever reservations they may rightly have about EU structures and stay where they are, abandoning the siren calls of cheap populists and—who knows—perhaps even gaining the confidence to challenge those structures in the name of a life-sustaining social system. For one thing that remains unchanged either by Brexit or by the coronavirus is that there are in the final analysis only two political possibilities on offer: socialism or barbarism.

¹⁹ Larry Elliott, ‘Growth data points to catastrophe in making for UK economy’, *ExecReview*, 9 Oct. 2020. Available at <http://www.execreview.com/2020/10/growth-data-points-to-catastrophe-in-making-for-uk-economy/>. Accessed 13 Oct. 2020.

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