Existential anxiety: how Leave and Remain became badges of self-identity

The division of British society into Leavers and Remainers has been one of the most disturbing aspects of Brexit discourse. **Christopher Browning (University of Warwick)** *looks at how these identities have emerged from the deep and destabilising anxieties that the vote, and its aftermath, triggered.*

Whether one is for or against (some form of) Brexit, it is evident that on all sides high and sustained levels of Brexit-induced anxieties have risen throughout British society. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, this was evident most immediately amongst 'Remainers'. As time has passed, however, 'Leavers' have also become increasingly anxious and angry. Rather than these anxieties leading to a desire for compromise and accommodation, British society is becoming increasingly tribal and polarised. A fracturing is apparent – with the emergence of a Britain divided between fundamentally contrasting notions of national identity, and where social trust is in short supply. All this is fostering a sense of political and democratic crisis.

Marchers in London, 2016. Photo: Alisdar Hickson via a CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence

In two recent papers, focusing on Remainers and Leavers respectively, I have explored the nature and generation of these Brexit anxieties and where in both cases it is shown how Brexit-induced anxieties have often had profound and destabilising impacts on people's everyday lives and emotional sense of well-being. The analyses draw on the work of psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and theologists who argue that we are only ever a short step away from being overwhelmed by existential angst about the contingent nature of existence, and foreboding dread that our sense of being in the world might be destabilised. Because these anxieties are fundamental to existence, they cannot be eradicated, but they can be managed and 'bracketed out' such that people feel able to 'go on' with everyday life without the constant intrusions of existential concerns (Anthony Giddens, 1991).

The bracketing out of existential anxieties is typically achieved through people's development and routinisation of socially embedded biographical narratives of self-identity. These provide a veneer of stability, certainty and trust in the nature of the world and one's place and role within it that acts as a grounding and basis for action and agency. Without the development and routinisation of such narratives, the world would not only appear chaotic, but as the psychiatrist R. D. Laing (2010) pointed out, the individual will likely suffer deep feelings of vulnerability because they are likely to experience a fragile sense of autonomy, identity and cohesiveness. They will struggle to cognitively organise and adapt to a changing world and will thereby be prone to feeling overwhelmed and petrified. Laing described individuals in such a situation as suffering from a sense of 'ontological insecurity', encapsulated by the 'dread of losing the "self"'.

To be clear, Remainers and Leavers experiencing high levels of Brexit-induced anxieties are not suffering from a mental disorder, but Brexit has profoundly challenged and destabilised the sense of ontological security of many people across British society – not least because it has been experienced as challenging established worldviews and narratives of both self and national identity. For many people, it has also brought into question their sense and understanding of 'home' as a place of safety, acceptance and belonging and for some people disrupted the otherwise affirming nature of daily routines.

For Remainers, of course, Brexit-induced anxieties were initially sparked by the referendum itself and its subsequent fallout. For these people, the referendum and prospects of Brexit have generated deep levels of uncertainty at both an individual and collective level. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, Remainers frequently described themselves as 'heartbroken', with Brexit experienced as a death to be mourned and grieved. For British citizens there has been a sense that European aspects of British identity are being stripped away, and where the very idea of Britishness and what it stands for is often understood as undergoing a baffling transformation – often expressed in terms of an outward-oriented multicultural and cosmopolitan nation becoming insular, ignorant and unwelcoming. Remainers often express a sense of increasingly feeling like 'strangers in a strange land' where home is no longer an unquestioned place of security and self-affirmation, but an increasingly problematic construction.

Of course, for ethnic minorities and European residents such feelings have often been experienced viscerally at street level, particularly insofar as Brexit unleashed a wave of often racist and vitriolic sentiment that became reason enough for others to question their rights of belonging as (equal) citizens, in the case of minority groups, and of residence in the case of European nationals.

Unsurprisingly such experiences have fostered a sense of rejection and a loss of acceptance and social trust within local communities, with people reporting changes in their daily routines, including shopping in different places or speaking less in public out of fears of being exposed by their accent. For Remainers who are British citizens this has also been accompanied by a deep sense of shame and stigmatisation about what Britain 'has done' and what it is seen to 'stand for', with the sense of national identity tainted and no longer a source of pride and self-esteem

However, if Remainers have become increasingly anxious, then so too have many Leavers. On the face of it this might seem surprising. It was the Leavers who 'won' the referendum after all – and the Leave campaign made great play out of the idea that Brexit would be a moment of national recovery and fulfilment. In this respect, it is worth noting that while Remainers have come to view EU membership as a fundamental source of stability and cosmological ordering, with Brexit threatening chaos, crisis and ontological insecurity, the Leave campaign countered that chaos, crisis and high levels of insecurity are what large numbers of people are experiencing right now, with Brexit promising reclaimed freedom and liberty, sovereignty and control, subjectivity and agency. This is one reason why the Leave campaign appealed to large groups of people for whom economic and cultural changes experienced at a local level have destabilised their sense of belonging, and who have often come to feel marginalised, ignored and excluded, but also socially stigmatised and shamed for not embracing the preferred direction of travel of what are often perceived as an aloof political, economic and cultural elite (Michael Kenny, 2016: 326-7).

The problem, of course, was that such arguments were inherently nostalgic, dangling a fantasy of recovery of an idealised and ultimately imaginary past that is therefore inevitably out of reach. Brexit was presented as something categorical and definitive, as moving from one epoch (of EU subjugation) into a new better one (of freedom and liberty), and in which 'we could have our cake and eat it', to quote Boris Johnson. The inevitable protracted negotiations and messy compromises have therefore fostered a sense that Brexit is being 'betrayed' or 'stolen', while Remainers' disdainful accusations of Leave voters as ignorant, narrow-minded bigots often reaffirms feelings of resentment and stigmatisation.

This last point is important because as anticipated within the psychological literature, people experiencing heightened senses of dislocation, instability and rising anxiety are prone to adopt strategies that can actually exacerbate the problem. They may try to re-establish a sense of order, certainty and self-identity through retreating into sanctified notions of self-identity, while simultaneously vilifying and depersonalising those others now seen as a threat to the individual and their group – instead of engaging in a more self-reflective analysis of the individual's (and their group's) own shortcomings. We see this, for example, in the routine disregard and discrediting of almost all interventions by the other side and the increasingly casual way in which both Remainers and Leavers bandy around words like betrayal, traitor and enemy. Politically and socially, though, the concern is that the emergence of such tribalism may presage a more fundamental breakdown in social trust in which compromise becomes increasingly difficult because people are disinclined to engage with those on the other side of the debate.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. It is based on two of the author's recent papers. The first, focused on Remainers, is published in [European Security](). The second, focused on Leavers, is presently under journal review.

References

Giddens, Anthony (1991) Modernity and Self-Identity (Cambridge: Polity).

Laing, Ronald David (2010) The Divided Self (London: Penguin).

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