

The Great Divide

The first book in our Brexit Bite-Size series was published earlier this year. 'Do They Mean Us? – The Foreign Correspondents' View of Brexit' explores the views of Brexit from a wide variety of influential voices.

With seismic changes in UK politics, its relationships with the EU and the rest of the world, John Mair and Neil Fowler have commissioned and edited this collection of essays which reveal how some of the world's most influential journalists view the referendum, the negotiations and the future for the UK.

The book, commissioned by John Mair, in a partnership between the Birmingham City University Centre for Brexit Studies, looks at the most important UK political decision for 40 years. The writers, all distinguished foreign correspondents based in the UK or elsewhere, have in many cases lived and worked in the UK for many years and they each discuss their experience and perspective of Brexit in 16 entertaining, and often hard-hitting, articles.

On the blog today, we are sharing a sneak peek of Journalist Angela Antetomaso's chapter in the book, which discusses how she felt the impact of the Brexit vote. Enjoy...

The Great Divide

I would have never believed it could happen. Not to me. Not in the UK.

In all truth, the last few days before the Referendum, talking to colleagues and friends here and there, I could sense a great discomfort all around. I knew some of them were going to vote to leave the EU, even if they'd never admit it. It didn't matter, I kept on repeating to myself: after all, it was only a few of them. Brexit would never happen

And then it did.

That night, while the first significant results started coming out, when the unthinkable was slowly becoming reality, I was stunned. I knew my life would change for ever.

And it did.

It was only a matter of weeks before I ended up being the target of someone's rage, racism and frustration.

The bus to the City

It happened on a bus, one cold morning in November 2018. I was going to work, happily planning the day ahead. Being a television presenter, I was smartly dressed and made up, going through my notes and preparing for my live show.

On its way from Chelsea to the City, the bus was nearing Parliament Square when an elderly man nicely approached me. He smiled, said good morning and asked me where I was from.

I didn't see it coming.

As soon as I uttered the word Italy, his attitude suddenly changed: a long string of insults and abuse came out of his mouth, leaving me – and the crowd on the bus – totally shocked.

“Get the f*** out of this country, what are you doing here? Go back home, you are not welcome!”

Wait – was he really talking to me? I was frozen.

The entire crowd of commuters was looking in awe, but nobody uttered a word or raised an arm to stop him.

I got out of the bus as if in trance. I couldn't even react to that. I was speechless. Did THAT really happen? Did it happen to ME? I looked smart and business-like, I was happily minding my own business. How could that be?

Not a Londoner

In my mind, the images of my life in London started unravelling. I had been living and working here for about 20 years, this was MY home now. Did he really say I wasn't welcome – in my own home?

And that was when it really hit me hard.

I had always proudly seen myself as a Londoner. After the Referendum, I expected there could be some kind of divide, but not directly impacting my life. I was a Londoner, I had been here for so long...but only then I realised: for them I was not a Londoner, I was Italian. I was on the other side.

I was European – and by default, 'not welcome'. I didn't belong any more. It didn't matter that I had a (great) job, nor that I already had a job when I came here.

I had moved from New York to London because I was offered a position as a television presenter in the City, at Bloomberg Television. After a few years I had joined CNBC: ever since, I had been working as a presenter for its Italian-speaking channel.

Not only I had a job, but from the very beginning I had done all it was necessary to fit in. I arrived here in the late '90s: I landed in the UK on a Sunday afternoon and a few hours later, on the Monday morning, I was at work. The first day in the job my new employer did everything possible to make sure I could properly begin my new life in the UK. Before my training even started, they helped me open a bank account, set up my National Insurance number, sort out the formalities to help me rent a flat.

Since then, I had been steadily working every single day, and done all I could to settle in. I paid taxes, I registered with a GP, I had bought a house, a car, I had friends.

London was not only my dream – it was my home, and it had been for a very long time. I had a life here. I was settled. At least, I was – until now. All of a sudden, I started wondering if my future was really going to be here.

My world had changed

After the incident on the bus, things had changed inside me. I started noticing details I had never seen before: the way people looked at me, how they would sometime sneer or act dismissively...was it just my impression or was it real?

In all honesty, most of the time it was very real. It was all around me. Some people now felt entitled to take out their anger and direct it at foreigners, because that was the 'will of the people'. Truth is, it didn't even matter anymore if it was real or not: my whole world had changed anyway. I had changed inside.

The joy I always felt going to work every day, either walking through the streets of London or riding a bus across town to reach the office; the excitement of living in such a vibrant, wonderful city. All of that slowly began to fade.

My husband and I started talking about moving – but where to? This was home. Shall we go to Italy, or shall we explore other countries in Europe? There are so many beautiful European cities where we could easily settle and work...why stay here?

We started imagining our life out of the UK.

On the one hand, it was unthinkable to leave after so long – but on the other hand, would I still want to stay? That was my dilemma: after so many years working and paying taxes in the UK, I could easily request settled status or apply for British citizenship. The latter had actually always been in my mind, having spent most of my adult life in this country and totally loving it.

Was that still the case, though? Would I still want to be part of it, or was Theresa May's 'hostile environment' working on me as well?

Friends, colleagues, acquaintances...all of them kept on repeating how all that was happening had nothing to do with 'people like me'. I had 'such a glamorous job'; made 'good money'; was 'living the great life'...the hostility was only directed at the so-called 'low-skilled people'; the ones coming here with nothing and asking for benefits, the ones who came to 'steal jobs' and to 'take advantage of the free NHS'. That hostility was definitely not directed at the 'high-flyer' TV

presenter – who, moreover, being a foreign correspondent, was by default not stealing anyone's job...

...but was that really true?

Would the British people be able to tell the difference between who came here to work hard and contribute to society, and who came to exploit the system? Would they even care to try to spot the difference?

I knew many people would. After all, this is a country that's always been the epitome of fairness and of perfect multicultural integration.

Tension grows

The problem, though, is that the hostile environment really exists – and often the hostility is palpable, and indistinctly directed at anyone who is not British – low-skilled and high-skilled people, low-income and high-income people...no difference at all. And that obviously includes people who, like me, came FOR work and who stayed TO work. People who made their life here.

Has anything changed since that incident on the bus? I have my doubts. As a foreign correspondent, I have been reporting about Brexit almost daily and I know the ins and outs of it all. And what I see from my point of view is that the divide and the tension are actually growing, not only between Britain and Europe but also amongst British people...and, in my opinion, all of this discontent is cynically being exploited by politicians in order to advance their career, by selling people the dream of independence and sovereignty – with the only result to make them poorer.

Making sense

I hope in the long run sense would prevail, but I don't think I will ever forget how much this country has changed after the Referendum. Truth is, I am only one of millions of Europeans feeling incredulity and disconcert about what we are seeing around us, and about our sudden fall into the 'unwelcome' category.

Such a striking contrast to the way I have felt for a very long time. When I first arrived, I had fallen in love with London, and London had embraced me with open arms. Over the years, I have always stayed so enthusiastic and happy, and believed my life was going to be here forever.

Do I still believe that now? I'm not sure anymore. Only time will tell, and luckily my job could take me anywhere. But one thing I do know: life in the UK, as it was before, will never come back. Nor for me, nor for anybody else – British and Europeans alike.

'Do They Mean Us? – The Foreign Correspondents' View of Brexit' is available in paperback and on Kindle now. [Find out more here.](#)