

# This Is Not An Island

***By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University***

Returning from the (brilliant) Regional Studies Association Annual Conference in Santiago de Compostela in Spain last week, I had plenty of time on the journey home to muse on the issues of borders and regions that were discussed at the conference. It was also pleasing to see David Hearne present work based on our recently released book [\*Regional Success After Brexit: the Need for New Measures\*](#) (Emerald Publishing – which is freely available to read online thanks to Knowledge Unlatched funding support).

In this context I particularly enjoyed the closing plenary presentation and discussion from Professor Anssi Paasi providing critical insights into the overlap between regional studies and border studies as evolving fields of scholarly enquiry. Just the very premise of discussion of borders, at one level, to me reinforced the view in my mind of disruptive events such as Brexit as necessarily undermining teleological accounts of history that would posit some type of (idealised) socio-economic end state that the world would reach.

I am thinking specifically of “hyperglobalists” such as Francis Fukuyama and Thomas Friedman, who collared much of the academic debate in these areas and generated much publicity for themselves in doing so. Fukuyama will be remembered particularly for his provocative book title “The End of History”, which now well and truly will be judged as premature. If anything, events such as Brexit, the presidency of Donald Trump in the US, and an upsurge of “populist” movements around the world have demonstrated, is that history is full of surprises and upsets to the established order of things.

Who in 1987 for example (beyond a narrow coterie of Sovietologists, perhaps) would have predicted that the Berlin Wall would come down in 1989 and the subsequent break-up of the USSR two years after that? All of which makes me realise just how territorial units should be seen as constantly being in flux, almost kaleidoscopic in terms of their exposure to forces outside and within.

In that sense, the established tri-polar order of today, with the “global triad” of Europe, the US and East Asia (principally, China and Japan) as described by international business scholars such as Peter Dicken (“Global Shifts”) should not be taken as a permanent feature of the politico-economic landscape (as Dicken illustrated in his seminal book). Europe in particular, with the grouping of 28 (soon to be 27?) nation states under the EU is particularly fragile as a cohesive territorial unit at this point in time.

Although, of course, as we have written in these blog pages before, there is nothing especial or permanent about nation-states, the UK included. As it is, it is a construct of four “home nations” (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) plus a number of British Overseas Territories / Crown Dependencies (Channel Islands, Isle of Man, Gibraltar etc.), each with varying degrees of devolved power.

These sub-nations in themselves represent the outcomes of power struggles between earlier territorial units of competing elites, with Scotland for example forming over the course of about the period 800 AD to 1300 AD, with various “peoples” (Picts, Brythonic/Welsh Celts, Gaelic Celts, Angles, Vikings, Normans and Flemish etc.) coming together under a single monarchy as realised through the Scottish wars of independence against the “English” (or to be more precise, the French-speaking Plantagenet rulers of England) in the period 1290 – 1320.

Though to stress again, there was nothing pre-ordained about this, and territorial configuration of “Britain” could easily have been different (depending on the outcome of battles that could have swung either way, or the death of a capable ruler and replacement with an incompetent one and so on).

In a similar fashion, England split away from the Roman Catholic domain in the 16th Century because its then ruler, Henry VIII, repudiated the authority of the Pope to allow him to divorce Catherine of Aragon. It has been argued by a number of commentators that this “divorce” from Catholic Christendom and subsequent growth of islander exceptionalism and a feeling of distance from them “over there on the Continent” constituted the “First Brexit”.

However, there was nothing pre-ordained about this and had Henry had more luck in producing a male heir in his first marriage then it is possible that England would not have embraced the Protestant Reformation at all.

Which goes to show that Brexit can hardly be seen as a national reawakening against an over-mighty European hegemon. England and the rest of the UK have all been closely connected with proximate countries and the wider European domain at previous points in history. England in the 15th Century was ruled by French-speaking monarchs who waged war (the “Hundred Years War”) to assert their claim to the French Crown; a French-descended (and still largely French-speaking) nobility imported from the Norman Conquest in 1066 and there was widespread use of Latin by the clergy and scholarly communities.

These individuals saw themselves as part of a wider Christendom and in no way separate. During these periods, the English Channel was seen as more of a highway than a barrier and British (francophone) elites looked to the mainland for their political and cultural inspiration.

If we cast our kaleidoscope back just blink of an eye further (in geological time terms) then the British Isles as they are today have only existed since the end of the last Ice Age (about 10,000 years ago), and Britain was linked to the rest of Europe with dry land.

Cast our kaleidoscope further back in time, the lands that would become Britain formed parts of separate continents: *Laurentia* (which contained “Scotland” and much of North America) and *Avalonia* (which contained “England” and “Wales” and bits of France and Germany) that collided in the Palaeozoic era – a process known as the Caledonian Orogeny, which created the Scottish Highlands.[\[1\]](#)

Viewed in the prism of geological time then, our current island status is but a short-term illusion. In the human epoch, the island status of the UK for most of the period since the end of the last Ice Age has not even been close to something all-defining against the rest of Europe. Even today, we continue to make countless journeys across the Channel to the mainland, thousands of us have properties in France

and Spain for example, and we delight in European culture (as the Regional Studies Association Annual Conference enabled me to do).

When even leading Brexiteers have opted to take out citizenship in another EU country – QED Nigel Lawson applying for French citizenship, and Nigel Farage encouraging his children to take out German citizenship by dint of his wife's nationality – one would have to ask what then is the separatist logic of Brexit? I could well counter by saying that “this country is not an island”. The borders we see and construct are fluid and change over time (the EU at least is an attempt to break down borders).

[1] <https://www.geolsoc.org.uk/Plate-Tectonics/Chap4-Plate-Tectonics-of-the-UK/Variscan-Orogeny>.

*As an interesting aside, the distinctive terrain of Devon and Cornwall and South Wales coalfields were created as a result of the Variscan/Hercynian Orogeny of mountain-building that occurred after this as Gondwana collided with this proto-Europe some 290 million years ago (ibid.).*