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ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

Steampunk Nationalism

Maciej Janowski

The resignation letter of Boris Johnson to Theresa May, published on 9 July 2018, strikes a familiar chord with historians of nineteenth and early twentieth century national movements. 'Brexit should be about opportunity and hope', wrote the former Foreign Secretary.

> That dream is dying. . . . If a country cannot pass a law to save the lives of female cyclists . . . then I don't see how that country can truly be called independent. . . . We are now in the ludicrous position of asserting that we must accept huge amounts of precisely such EU law, without changing an iota, because it is essential for our economic health – and when we no longer have any ability to influence these laws as they are made. In that respect we are truly headed for the status of colony – and many will struggle to see the economic or political advantages of that particular arrangement.

These words may produce in readers an eerie sense of déjà vu, a feeling of witnessing a spectre from the first years of the twentieth century. A Ruritanian national activist could have written these phrases on behalf of his small, unknown but beautiful and heroic homeland. Taking examples from the late nineteenth century onwards, we could quote aplenty about girls (not necessarily cyclists) abused, economies subdued by colonial exploitation and foreign laws imposed. If we turn to radical far-right politicians, the eerie feeling only grows stronger. Take Nigel Farage's remarks about the English language being threatened in various parts of the United Kingdom by foreign languages (see e.g. *The Guardian*, 14 February 2014, online edition). Similarities abound across the political spectrum: by now many observers have identified the language of anti-Semitism in the proclamations of the Labour Party leadership around Jeremy Corbyn. This anti-Semitism, embedded in a pro-Palestinian stance and criticism of Israel, rings back to the notion of a 'progressive anti-Semitism' that was used by some anti-Semitic leftists in Russian Poland before the First World War. Of course there is no possibility of direct borrowings; there is just an analogy.

All this makes me think of the 'steampunk' genre of science fiction and fantasy, which presents a surrealist vision of the modern world by combining elements of nineteenth and twenty-first century fashion, architecture and technology. In the same manner, in the statements of present-day nationalists we witness a parallel modernity in which various nineteenth-century phenomena are developed into their grotesque twenty-first century consequences.

My first thought was: perhaps we are, after all, closer to the nineteenth century than we previously thought? Perhaps these nationalist phrases and patterns of behaviour are more deeply anchored in human souls than the majority of historians (myself included) would like to assume? Then, a second reflection qualifies the first: perhaps, in the light of recent developments in the UK, we can now understand the nineteenth century better? It is worth bearing in mind that not only is the present shaped by the past, but also that recent history can help us rethink hidden stories in earlier periods. As a specialist in 'long' nineteenth century history, I have long seen this period, and especially the century's second half, as an on the whole rather stable period of evolutionary growth – economic growth combined with political liberalisation. This optimistic view was strengthened during the 1990s and the early 2000s. I had the impression that the

peaceful enlargement of the European Union and growing European integration project were fundamentally a return to the late nineteenth century processes, which were then so tragically interrupted by the age of world wars, Nazism and communism. Now, I ask myself whether I should not see the nineteenth century differently altogether; whether the disruptive elements in today's world, like radical nationalism, were not, in fact, much stronger than I had supposed. And then, a third reflection follows: why is it that the eruption of nationalist attitudes took place in the UK in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

To be sure, chauvinism and jingoism have long had an important place in the UK's history. However, it used to be a different kind compared to the sort of nationalism that prevailed in Eastern Europe. The differences are easier felt intuitively than analysed, but are significant nonetheless. It seems that for a long time the trade mark of British nationalism was a genuine self-assurance and superiority of a kind that does not express itself through patriotic songs on bravery (there is always something Freudian in such songs – a hidden admission of a complex), but that takes the UK's supremacy for granted so much that it hardly needs to be mentioned at all. Such an attitude allows for a certain disdainful tolerance towards differences: the system of 'indirect rule' in the empire, as well as the conviction that free trade, not protectionism, would suit British interests best, are instances of that. This attitude can also be seen in a long and respectable tradition of national self-mockery (which is, in fact, a sophisticated way of expressing national superiority), ranging from Gilbert and Sullivan to Monty Python.

The Eastern European version, by contrast, has long been marked by greater anxiety about external and imminent danger. There is no room for self-irony here; the cults of national heroes are about defeats rather than victories. A typical feature is what one could call a feeling of 'mutual oppression': two neighbouring nations usually express, in very similar terms, the fear of one another, presenting themselves as oppressed and their neighbour as the oppressor. It is interesting to see parallel language and expressions on both sides of these conflicts; both borrow terms from the military (involving outposts, ramparts, bastions) and navy (concerning bulwarks that have to stop the enemy waves). Roger Chickering many years ago identified and analysed this dynamic in the example of the Pan-German League in pre-1914 Germany, but plenty of other cases could be quoted. Both sides present themselves as victims, and their enemies as aggressors. I agree with those scholars of nationalism who think that such expressions are not just propagandistic devices and see genuine fear of neighbours as one of the central motives of nationalist emotion and ideology.

This dichotomy of nineteenth-century expressions of British nationalism on one hand, and Eastern European articulations on the other, can only ever be a superficial one, and cannot expose their differences in any systematic way. Nonetheless, they seem pertinent for anyone thinking historically about Brexit and its precedents. It seems that the recent outbursts of nationalist feelings in the UK associated with the pro-Brexit campaign are much closer to the Eastern European tradition than to traditional expressions of British nationalism. The nationalism of the Brexiteers is a defensive one; here the UK no longer appears as so strong that it does not have to be afraid of any enemies but rather as a victim at the mercy of the intrigues of foreigners. It also falls into the trap of this 'mutual oppression' that is so common on the continent but not in the British history of remaining 'aloof'. Nigel Farage's fears about language are a good example: here the English language is threatened by the languages of immigrants at the very moment when, throughout the world, concerns are spreading about the threat posed by the English language to all others, including to such apparently strong languages as French and German.

From the point of view of classical modernisation theory from the 1960s and 1970s, Brexit and recent British developments simply should not have happened (nor should the electoral victory of Donald Trump in the United States). Historically, it can often be observed that a strong modernising push results in a backslash and the growth of radically anti-modernist attitudes. But this is usually the case in countries and regions that have been only recently been subject to rapid

modernisation and its associated transformations. It has never been applied to countries, such as the UK, that have been paragons of modernity since at least the nineteenth century! If there was anywhere in the world where 'mature' democracy could be found, surely it would be in the UK (contrasted with 'immature' democracy, as exhibited in East Central Europe after the fall of communism). In these terms, 'mature democracy' is based on the rational public sphere as analysed by Jürgen Habermas, with a belief in compromise as the dominating force. It gives the masses sufficient opportunities to get accustomed to democratic procedures and to integrate the values of liberal democracy. The UK seems to be the textbook definition of this approach. Brexit? 'Such things do not happen in criminal practice in England', as Sherlock Holmes memorably answered to a suggestion that a crime might have been committed by a vampire. Surprisingly, it happened.

This surprise is perhaps more painfully felt in the European periphery than in the UK itself. Since the Enlightenment liberals and occidentalists were looking to the UK as a model (while more radical democrats were looking to France). Books and essays abounded that depicted England as an exemplary land of liberty, progress, modernity, moderation, and a sense of humour, as in the *Letters from England* by Karel Čapek (discussed in this roundtable by Adam Hudek). This attitude was not confined to perspectives from the periphery. The whole European continent, even France, had its liberal Anglophiles, as the *Histoire d'Angleterre* by André Maurois aptly shows. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, self-perceived to be on Europe's periphery, this attitude was particularly widespread and strong because it presented a vision of peaceful, gradual and successful modernisation. In the light of this history, Brexit is to them a painful disappointment.

Historians have tended to explain the early twentieth-century growth of radical nationalism in the Habsburg Monarchy and in other parts of East Central and Eastern Europe by pointing to the backwardness of politics and the economy in these regions. The peasant masses who entered politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they argued, barely a generation or two after they were liberated from serfdom, did not have any recipes for how to behave within a constitutional framework in their cultural memory. They had few possibilities for advancing their careers in an underdeveloped capitalist economy. The economy was also unable to absorb the growing intelligentsia. All this created frustrations both among the elites and among the masses, with a resulting growth in either radical leftist (communist) or radical rightist (ultranationalist) demagoguery. By contrast, explanations for the British growth of nationalism since 2016 have been markedly different, stressing the specificity of the post-modern conditions: post-truth, the role of the internet and other social media in disseminating 'fake news' and mobilising the hitherto marginal groups of cranks and radicals, and resulting in the shrinking authority of the 'respectable' media.

Thus, two cases of in some ways very similar nationalist mobilisations are interpreted in two very different ways. After all, there was no internet or social media in 1900 in Austrian or Russian Poland, and no backward peasantry with memories of serfdom in the present-day UK. There are, I believe, two ways of explaining this divergence. Maybe the analogy is unhelpful, and certain similarities in political language may disguise fundamental structural differences. As a result, different explanations are needed to explain what are two different situations. But there is a second possible interpretation, which I prefer: maybe these two different historical moments are not that different after all? Perhaps, if we look more closely, we can find similarities between them that we did not see at first? Perhaps the masses in Eastern and East Central Europe around 1900 were, in fact, more modernised, and the public in today's UK is more traditional, than we have tended to assume? The term 'modern mass media' means something different in the different contexts of 1900 and 2016 – the cheap illustrated daily press in the first case and the internet and new social media in the second. But there is a certain analogy in how they operated in society: they speed up the circulation of news, favour sensational and unproven claims and attract the new, hitherto unrepresented social groups that were considered radical by the

mainstream political groups. Thus, we observe two waves of modernisation which are not identical but which produced comparable results.

The above may help us to understand why some nationalist catchwords of today sound so similar to those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, it does not explain the question of why nationalist attitudes, as developed and declared during the 'Leave' campaign, grew so strong in the UK. Perhaps the post-modernists were right that clear-cut dichotomies between centres and peripheries, modernity and backwardness, do not work, since the world is in state of fluidity and flux. However, historians need categories to embrace the social reality they study, and I cannot imagine any attempts to analyse modern European or world history without concepts such as modernity, backwardness, centre or periphery. The ideas and debates unleashed by Brexit should perhaps force historians to return once more to these concepts and rethink them in a way that fits the world around us. If we were to abandon them entirely we would have to construct a completely new explanatory scheme, based on a different set of categories. How this new scheme could look is beyond my imagination. If nothing else, Brexit should certainly make historians revisit their historical models and concepts.