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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Imagining Brexit, reimagining Britain

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Abstract

There are times in the political life of any nation in which its imagining and reimagining become more intensely political, more conscious and more consciously intersubjective. Brexit has provided, provides today and will surely continue to provide a series of such moments. In and through a critical appreciation of Benedict Anderson's famous reflections on the nation as an 'imagined community', I consider the (necessarily) imagined character of Brexit and the reimaginings of Britain that its imagining envisaged. I reflect on whether—and if so how and in what ways—'actually existing Brexit' is likely to pose a reality check on imagined Brexit, exploring in the process some of the wider political implications.

Keywords Brexit · Imagined community · Nation · Positional issues · Valence issues

> "The nation … is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lies *the image of their communion* … it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation *is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship*" (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1991: 6, 7, emphasis added).

Nations are always in the process of being imagined and reimagined.[1] They exist as what Searle or Berger and Luckmann would call 'social facts' (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Searle 1995, 2010). Their facticity, in other words, resides in both the

[1] A rather earlier version of these reflections was first presented as a plenary address to the conference *Imagining Britain: Past, Present and Future* which took place at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne, 13–15 October 2021. It was, more recently, presented at the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute. I am grateful to the organisers of both events and to the participants on each occasion as well as to the referees of this journal and to Florence Faucher, Nick Randall and Lisa Suckert for their incisive and insightful comments and suggestions. Needless to say, the responsibility for all that follows is mine entirely.

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process of their imagining and reimaging, on the one hand, and the accumulated socio-political tracks and traces to which that in turn gives rise, on the other. The nation exists, as such, in the realm of the imaginary. And that arguably makes it rather difficult to study—not least as the realm of the imaginary, certainly the realm of the political imaginary, is a realm that is both individual and collective, inter- and intra-subjective, simultaneously. The nation is, in this sense, both a collective act of imagining and something imagined differently in each and every imagining of it.

As this perhaps implies the nation is made and remade. Its social facticity is ongoing, recursive and iterative. The imaginings and reimaginings out of which it is constituted and reconstituted are typically conducted at the individual level even if they draw on ideational resources that are intersubjective (shared, overlapping imaginaries of the nation). They are also invariably enacted and performed socially. And these, in turn, are reinforced through the performance of a series of more or less codified collective social practices and rituals (singing, chanting, flag-waving … queueing).

At the level of the individual, the imagining and reimagining of the nation and, above all, the extent to which this informs behaviour is invariably subconscious; and where it is rendered more conscious, it is typically only ever partially so. It can be brought to consciousness; but it is never clear that what is brought to consciousness is the same as what might have animated the behaviour had it not been brought to consciousness.

Some important implications follow from this. Whilst nations are always in the process of being imagined and reimagined and are lived, in a sense, through that ongoing imagining and reimagining, that process can proceed differently—more or less consciously, more or less collectively, with higher or lower salience to those engaged in it, in a more or less divisive way, and with greater or lesser transformatory consequences. In this and other respects, its character, form and content is likely to vary over time and, indeed, between nations and between types of nation.

In Britain, in particular, its very contestation ensures that the nation is typically never far from the surface of political consciousness. Arguably, too, in Britain, its imagining is of a very particular, possibly even a singular kind. Britain is an odd type of nation. For unlike most other 'nations', Britain is a multinational 'nation' and, as such, something of an anomaly or performative contradiction (Nairn 1977; see also Aughey et al. 2016; Kenny 2014; Wellings and Kenny 2019). In a very basic way, to imagine Britain *as a nation* simply requires more imagination. This is complicated further in that Britain (as a state and as a nation) is also typically construed as professing a certain multiculturalism (Ashcroft and Bevir 2018; Meer and Modood 2009). This—or that at least is the claim—extends beyond the nation itself and the constituent nations from which it is forged. In so doing, it (again ostensibly) extends beyond the privileged imaginaries of its constituent nations and their constituent national identities.

Both multi-nationalism and multiculturalism (mythic or otherwise) bring a singularity and an additional complexity to British nationhood to which we will have need to return.

Such singularity notwithstanding, there are times in the political life of any nation in which the content of such imaginings and reimaginings become more intensely social, more conscious and more consciously intersubjective. In such

moments or episodes, the nation becomes in the process more collectively negotiated and more consciously political. Brexit has provided, provides today and will no doubt continue to provide a series of such moments.

Brexit brings a sustained intensity and a peculiar salience to this, bringing in the process a great deal to the surface. It seems to have achieved, or at least to have provided the context for, a rare level of collective consciousness, contestation and politicisation of nationhood and its imagining.

What it reveals is, I think, very interesting if perhaps rather troubling, with implications that reach potentially beyond Brexit and, indeed, beyond Britain itself. My aim in what follows is to tease out the specific implications for Britain and some of the potentially wider consequences, before reflecting, in conclusion, on the extent to which 'actually existing Brexit' imposes a reality check on the imagining of Brexit and the reimagining of Britain in and through Brexit.

What might Benedict Anderson have made of Brexit?

It is useful to start by returning to Benedict Anderson's seminal account of the nation as an imagined entity—an 'imagined community' in his terms. The core of this conception is well captured in the quote that forms the epithet to these reflections:

> "The nation … is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lies *the image of their communion* … it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation *is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.*" (1991: 6, 7).

When I re-read Benedict Anderson's seemingly timeless reflections now, they strike me as innocent and naïve in a way that they certainly did not when the book was first published (in 1983). Indeed, re-reading them now provokes in me a strange sense of nostalgia that leads me to question their apparent timelessness. To be clear, I am not accusing Anderson of nostalgia; the nostalgia is all mine. It is for a period in which it was possible, without irony, to suggest that "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" and particularly to do so without immediately noting that:

1. It is typically also conceived, and often in the very same breath, as an antipathy towards the other, the outsider, the enemy that is no less deep, no less profound and no less horizontal; and,

2. That such an enemy is not just to be found beyond the nation that is being imagined but within it from those who imagine that nation differently (the 'enemy within' in Margaret Thatcher's famous terms).[2]

Contemporary imaginaries of the nation, it seems intuitively credible to think, have diverged. But were they not always more divergent than Anderson assumed? Was Anderson naïve and innocent or did we live in more naïve and innocent times? How significant in the end is the difference between then and now? How timeless, in other words, is Anderson's imagining of the imagination of the nation?

What is clear is that in *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson himself imagined an imagination of the nation sufficiently aligned in all its richness and diversity as to draw together a community. There is at times an almost functional character to his thinking here. The imagination of the nation is akin to a political glue that holds the nation together as a fictional community despite the reality that, as he puts it, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them" (1991, p. 6). That is what it's there for; that, so to speak, is its job.

Anderson's conception of the nation has, of course, hardly proved immune to critique despite the intuitive appeal to most commentators of the idea of the nation as both imagined and, more specifically, imagined *as a community*. The widely perceived originality and strength of his approach resides in its de-naturalisation of the nation and his rendering of it as a political construct. To understand the nation, for Anderson, is to understand its political construction *as a nation* and to see that as both contingent and as an open-ended process—indeed, as an open-ended process precisely because it is contingent upon its ongoing construction and reconstruction (on the radicalism of that conceptual move, see especially Bergholz 2018). After Anderson's constructivist turn, at least for those who would embrace it, it is no longer possible to speak of the nation as a thing that might either rise and fall, wax or wane, over time (as, for instance, in Edgerton 2018).

Intriguingly, perhaps, Anderson's (at least implicit) constructivism has typically fared well in the extensive secondary literature to which his book has given risen. He is invariably critiqued not for his conception of the nation as imagined nor even (as in what follows) for his conception of the nation as imagined in a particular way—as a community. Rather, it is the temporal link that he draws between the nature and character of the nation that comes to be imagined in this way and the modernity that gives rise to it that has incurred the critics' attention. Many are sceptical of the connection to capitalism that he draws and the importance he thereby ascribes to print media in the 'origins and spread of nationalism' that he seeks to identify and to explain (see, for instance, Balakrishnan 1996; Breuilly 1996; Lesnoff 2002; Smith 1999).

[2] The irony, of course, is that Thatcher's phrase was first deployed in a speech hastily rewritten following the Brighton bombing and delivered to the backbench 1922 Committee of the Conservative Party in 1984, a year after the publication of the first edition of *Imagined Communities*.

The closest to a critique of the kind that I will offer below is that of those who suggest that Anderson's own characterisation of the nation as imagined is overly benign. He is very clear to articulate, to defend and to keep separate a conception of nationalism and one of racism (Kierman 1996; Miles 1983; Wollman and Spencer 2007).

Telling in this respect is his claim that, "the fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations" (1991, p. 149). There are many problems with this formulation, not least that easily discernible facts do not have very much to do with any of this and that many of the most heinous of racist discourses have been framed in terms of the realisation of an historical destiny. But the more typical problem with it identified in the literature is that to understand nationalism and racism in such terms leads Anderson (perhaps inadvertently) to fail to consider the possibility of the interdependence and inter-reliance of nationalist claims and racist assumptions. Nationalism, in Anderson's account, remains in a sense untainted by its all too real historical association and mutual imbrication with ethnic and other forms of racism (Lomnitz 2001; Miles 1983).

As Wollman and Spencer put it, "while racism is depicted [in Anderson's imaginary] as destructive, driven by hatred and fear, nationalism seems to be considered constructive, inspired by feelings of love and creativity, driven by aspirations and dreams for a better future" (2007, p. 14; citing Anderson, chapter 8).

As this perhaps already suggests, Anderson's account of the content of the national imaginary is, in the end, simply too monolithic and too uniform in character—ironically, perhaps, insufficiently constructivist. A similar observation is made by Philip Schlesinger who suggests that "Anderson's notion of the communicative community is open to doubt. The boundedness of a given national imaginary is one thing: *homogeneity* within those boundaries is quite another". As he goes on to explain, Anderson's error is to conflate, in effect, the very first construction of the nation facilitated by the dawning of the print capitalist age, "with the analytically separate question of how a national culture is continually redeveloped and the contours of national identity chronically redrawn" (1987, p. 250).

Brexit, most clearly, belongs to the latter rather than the former set of processes.

Similarly, as Craig Calhoun suggests, in a sensitive posthumous tribute to Anderson's work, "for Anderson, the question was how community—or solidarity or identity or indeed society itself—was imagined and through this imagination given shape and solidity" (2016, p. 12). That remains a good question and the nation, conceived of as an imagined community, remains (at least part) of a very good answer to that question. But it is not perhaps the question that poses itself most immediately today; and that, in turn, suggests that we need to revisit Anderson's original formulation if we are to apply it most effectively here.

What is already clear is that the nation as imagined by Anderson is a community projecting different but, in the end, sufficiently commensurate ideas and ideals about itself that it coheres (it is, in his words, a 'communion'). It is more likely to cohere *because* it is an imagined community. Today feels very different: in Britain, certainly, and in the wake of Brexit, above all; but beyond Britain too.

We are, it seems, more divided by our national imaginaries today than we were and perhaps ever were. Or are we? Is it not just that we are perhaps more aware of being divided by collective imaginaries of the nation? And is there a difference?

These are claims that it is very difficult to adjudicate—and the more we think about them the more difficult that adjudication becomes. But two points can perhaps usefully be made, neither of which in fact necessitates any such resolution.

First, whatever we make of it and of the reasons for it, Anderson's emphasis on commonality and unity does not provide us with the analytic resources to make good sense of the reimagining of Britain *as nation* inherent in the imagining of Brexit. But that is largely excusable. The motivation and rationale of his book, it is important to recall, was to describe the origins of nationalism, not perhaps all the subsequent pathologies to which it would give rise.

Yet the analysis of Brexit, specifically cast in terms of the reimaging of Britain that it entails, is in this respect potentially highly illuminating. It helps us reveal some of the silences, some of the limitations and some of the problems of the text that Anderson ultimately crafted. There are plenty of periods in the political history of Britain's 'Sceptred Isle' and many others besides in which the nation has been more divided by its collective imaginings of self than it has been united by them. The failure of the British state in the post First World War period to build the 'homes fit for heroes' that it had promised in return for the staggeringly unevenly distributed sacrifice of the trenches is but one obvious case in point (and it is, of course, an example of a more general kind, see for instance Cohen 2001).

Second, we live in a period of political time (though certainly not the first) in which the nation has been systematically politicised, almost weaponised, by those seeking to divide—and seeking to divide in and through their conscious use of national and nationalistic political motifs (Ganesh 2020; Gardell 2015; Hartzell 2018; Mondon and Winter 2019; Wirz et al. 2018). That was not perhaps the case either when the nation was first imagined or when *Imagined Communities* was first written (even if it was credibly more present in the latter than the former period—see Crines et al. 2016; Shilliam 2021).

Brexit provides a good example, though by no means the only one, of that weaponisation. For Brexit is—and has been since it was first imagined—a conflict fought over competing imaginings of 'the Britain that Britain would turn out to be under imagined Brexit'—and, perhaps now, 'the Britain that Britain would turn out to be under the Brexit that Brexit would turn out to be' (see also Hobolt et al. 2021).

Part of the problem here is that we never have known, and still do not know today, what 'the Brexit that Brexit will turn out to be' or 'the Britain that Britain will turn out to be' under such a Brexit will be (Hay 2020). Much of the rest of the problem arises from the almost inherent interpretive ambiguity in deciding to what extent Brexit (whether imagined or 'actually existing') is responsible for what 'the Britain that Britain will turn out to be' after Brexit feels like. What can and what cannot be attributed to Brexit is, arguably, one of the most contentious question of British politics today.

In what follows I seek to address each point in turn.

Imagining Brexit

First, Brexit, in a sense, could only be projected. It simply had to be imagined; and the likelihood, even if it were to have been imagined genuinely and dispassionately, that things would turn out to be *as imagined* was itself always likely to be vanishingly small. It is an obvious, but still crucial, point that in advance of the negotiation that any vote for Brexit would prompt it was impossible to know what the Brexit that Brexit would turn out to be would turn out to be—contingent on those negotiations, and much else besides, as it could only be. In such a context, it is hardly surprising that the Brexit imagined by Brexiteers was one chosen as if without constraint. It was a Brexit by design or better, perhaps, a Brexit by volition (since no design template was offered in advance of the vote nor, really, even afterwards).

But the same applies to the remainers' imagined Brexit too. Given the political stakes involved, the imagining of Brexit was almost never going to be anything other than almost purely disingenuous. Brexiteers posited an idealised Brexit chosen freely without constraint, 'remainers' posited a demonised Brexit ('the worst in this, the worst of all possible worlds', to turn Dr Pangloss on his head) and HM Treasury posited a spuriously precise and exactingly quantified Brexit (on the latter, see Hay & Semken (2021).

But even putting to one side the political motives of those imaging Brexit (and the political temptation to imagine Brexit in a particular way that they might have given rise to), the content of the Brexit that Brexit might turn out to be was extraordinarily difficult to predict. Here it is useful to ask ourselves what we would have needed to know to predict the Brexit that Brexit has thus far turned out to be. The number of credible items on that list is considerable and the vast majority of them, I would contend, were unknowable at the moment the referendum itself was called (Hay and Benoit 2021). It might also be pointed out that the sequencing of events has also been crucial. An at least equivalent number of similarly unknowable items (and the temporality of their unfolding) stand between us today and the Brexit that Brexit will ultimately turn out to be at some point (whenever that is) when we might agree that it is complete (whatever we take that to mean). In short, it is not just because those who imagined Brexit had a stake in the Brexit they imagined that the referendum campaign presented multiple Brexits.

But there were nonetheless some interesting differences—and some no less intriguing similarities—in the Brexits imagined and the very way in which they were imagined.

Consider each in turn. There were, I would argue, striking and systematic differences in the ways in which the Brexits (plural) of the Brexiteers were imagined when compared to those (again, plural) imagined by the remainers. The former were what I have elsewhere termed 'positional' in character; the latter were 'valence' in character.

This is part of a wider argument that I have made before. Brexit, I suggest, was always more likely than we tended to assume before a single vote was cast because of quite predictable turnout differentials—which served systematically to elevate the

vote for Brexit relative to that for leave (and hence the likelihood of Brexit).[3] Crucial to these (though one amongst many) is a factor scarcely discussed at all in the existing literature—the distinction between Brexit as a *positional* issue and Brexit as a *valence* issue and the relative propensity of valence and positional campaigning to mobilise voter participation (Hay and Benoit 2019). From the perspective of the remain campaign, the question of continued membership of the EU was, if not a valence issue per se, then a question that needed to be reposed in valance terms—as a technical and largely economic matter to be determined through the use of appropriate expertise.[4] Brexit, in effect, was a cost that could be calculated (to those with the technical skills for the task). In stark contrast, for both the official and unofficial leave campaigns, Brexit was a positional issue. It was a question of politics, emotion and choice not of economics; it was a question of values, personal conviction and identity which simply couldn't be reduced to a set of technical considerations that might be adjudicated dispassionately (far less trusted to an expert authority). It was normative, visceral and vernacular.[5]

The distinction is crucial and it is worth pausing to examine the empirical evidence (such as it is) for the valence character of the remain campaign and the positional character of the Brexit campaign(s).[6] That evidence comes from three rather different sources. The first is from the referendum itself and from an open-format question asked in Wave 7 of the British Election Study's analysis to their internet panel immediately before the opening of the formal campaign in 2016 (Prosser et al. 2016). It asked respondents "what matters most to you when deciding to vote in the EU referendum?". It revealed the starkly positional character of the vote for Brexit, with the most popular responses being 'immigration', 'sovereignty', 'control' and 'back' (presumably in the phrase 'bring back control'), 'borders' and 'laws'. Each of the issues to which these

[3] Whether, in the end, this is a marginal yet contributory factor or the 'smoking gun' that might help us ultimately explain the surprising vote for Brexit has yet to be established empirically. My argument does not require an adjudication of the question.

[4] The direct question of Brexit itself—should Britain leave or remain within the European Union—is, of course, an inherently and irreducibly positional question (at least in the absence of an absolute consensus on the subject). But the rationale of the remain campaign was to represent the (positional) question in valence terms by arguing, in effect, that if one were dispassionately to consider the potential implications of Brexit one would see that the clear and evident public good was and could only be served by a vote for remain. The implicit strategy was to depoliticise the question and, in so doing, to turn it into a question of reason rather than emotion, valence rather than positionality.

[5] Note, my argument at this stage is about the predominant motifs in the remain and leave campaigns and not necessarily about the predominant rationales exhibited in votes for remain and leave per se. It is, of course, likely that if the leave campaign was indeed conducted in largely positional terms that it will have reinforced the positional character of the vote for Brexit. But that is a second-order effect. My claim here is not that all remain voters thought in valence terms and all leave voters in positional terms. Nor is it that the relative proportion of valence and positional motifs and reflexes in the thinking of remain and leave supporters has proved static. It is highly credible to think that remain supporters became more positional in their thinking as the campaign unfolded (and, indeed, subsequently) precisely in reaction to the positional character and comportment of the leave campaign—and there is clear polling evidence for this (with the perceived racism of the leave campaign being reported as a significant motivating factor amongst remain supporters).

[6] Of which, of course, there were two—Boris Johnson and Michael Gove's official Brexit campaign and Nigel Farage's unofficial Brexit campaign.

words refer were, in the context of the Brexit campaign, positional questions (whether or not to reduce immigration, whether or not to reclaim sovereignty, whether or not to 'take back control' and so forth). By contrast the most popular responses amongst self-declared 'remainers' were very different: 'economy', 'rights', 'trade', 'stability', 'jobs', 'security' and 'future'. In the context of the Brexit campaign, these words were just as clearly associated with issues of a valence character (in the sense that no one was arguing in favour of reducing the size of the economy, eroding rights, reducing trade, threatening stability and security or endangering jobs).

A second source of data is rather more recent. It comes from Public First's polling for UK in a Changing Europe conducted in May and June 2023. The inevitable methodological difficulties notwithstanding, it presents perhaps the most extensive attitudinal survey to date of the various rationales exhibited by citizens in the Brexit referendum and, indeed, subsequently. It certainly warrants a more detailed exploration than current limits of space permits. But here perhaps most relevant are the insights it offers into the more or less positional and more or less valance character of the vote for Brexit and remain in 2016 (see Tables 1 and 2, respectively).

Self-declared remain and leave voters were asked to identify from a list of 16 items all those which best corresponded with their reasons for voting as they did. Below I list only those items identified by more than 30 per cent of the respective remain and leave samples; each item I code in positional or valence terms.

The ostensible message of this data may seem clear, but it does need careful interpretation. The tables that appear below strongly confirm the implicit hypothesis here: the positional character of support for Brexit and the valence character of support for remain. Five out of seven of the most popular rationales for remain supporters were, by my coding, valence in character (including the four most popular items) whilst five out of six of the most popular rationales for leave voters were positional in character (including, again, the four most popular items). Only one (valence) factor—the implications for the economy—appears on both lists: ranked first for remain voters and ranked fifth out of six items for leave voters. But a degree of caution is still required. For, ultimately convincing though it may still be, this is not an entirely neutral test to elicit the underpinning rationales for leave and remain support. Why?

Table 1 The predominantly valence rationale for remain

From what you remember, which of the following reasons best explain why you voted remain? (select all that apply—only those above 30 per cent shown)

Reason	%	Rationale
Damage to the economy	69	Projected negative change (valence)
Loss of free movement	52	Projected negative change (valence)
Better to solve problems internally	51	Retain positive situation (valence)
Isolation in the world	49	Projected negative change (valence)
Maintain closeness to EU countries	48	Retain positive situation (positional)
Loss of reputation in the world	41	Projected negative change (valence)
The Brexit campaign was racist	32	Negative emotive disposition (positional)

$N = 1550$ (re-weighted to better represent the national population by age and socio-economic profile)

Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe (26th May – 2nd June 2023)

Table 2 The predominantly positional rationale for leave *From what you remember, which of the following reasons best explain why you voted leave? (select all that apply—only those above 30 per cent shown)*

Reason	%	Rationale
Increase control over borders	68	Projected positive change (positional)
Increase control over immigration	61	Projected positive change (positional)
Dislike of EU institutions	50	Negative emotive disposition (positional)
Decrease immigration (numbers)	48	Projected positive change (positional)
Good for the economy	37	Projected positive change (valence)
Never felt European	31	Negative emotive disposition (positional)

$N = 1471$ (re-weighted to better represent the national population by age and socio-economic profile)

Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe (26th May–2nd June 2023)

Because the 16 items offered to self-declared remain and leave supporters in this survey were different (even if they did overlap) and they did not contain the same preponderance of valence and positional factors. Nor were they inductively derived.

That said, the rank ordering of these items *is* inductively generated, and it does seem consistently to promote to the top valence factors for remain supporters and positional factors for leave supporters. More importantly, perhaps, that more of the 16 items offered to leave supporters were positional in character might be taken as evidence of a different kind—that, in the judgement of these pollsters at least, the Brexit campaign was rather more positional in character than that for remain. And that, of course, is the argument that I am seeking to defend here (that it is reflected in the expressed rationales offered by voters is, in effect, an epiphenomenon).

A third, and arguably more reliable source of data comes from the (all too) little used Mass Observation Archive of open-format diary entries—here those submitted by 406 anonymous respondents between 2016 and 2017 recording their reflections on the EU referendum and Brexit (for the more detailed analysis of which see the brilliant work of Clarke and Moss 2021; Clarke et al. 2023; Moss et al. 2020). This is an amazingly rich and expressive source of data that captures, extraordinarily well and almost in real time, citizens' cognitive processing of and reactions to the campaign and vote for Brexit. For constructivists, this is primary data of rare and exceptional quality.

Once again, I cannot hope to do full justice to the richness of the empirical insight it offers in a piece of this kind. Instead, I draw simply on the pioneering analysis already conducted by others, here Nick Clarke, Jonathan Moss and their various co-authors (see, above all, Clarke and Moss 2021; Moss et al. 2020). Their research questions were rather different to mine, but the analysis they present reveals very clearly—and far more directly than in any other source I have seen—the distinctly positional character of support for leave and the distinctly valence character of support for remain.

As Clarke and Moss show in impressive detail, the predominant disposition of remain supporters towards Brexit, as captured in their diary entries, is one of fear: fear of isolation and of relative economic decline. There is a palpable sense, too, of

anticipated loss: of power, of influence, of economic activity, of employment prospects, of growth, of status and of security. This is valence negativity in the classic sense. For what is at issue here is not whether what might be lost is valuable but whether Brexit would lead to such a loss (and, possibly, the scale of that loss); and for these remain supporters the anticipated loss is palpable. Striking, too, is the phrase used by one respondent, "common sense demands nothing less [than a vote for remain]" (Clarke and Moss 2021, p. 737). When seen clearly and dispassionately, in other words, the opportunity of Brexit is an illusion; there is, effectively, no choice here.

In brutally stark contrast, the Brexit imagined by leave supporters is a liberation. Britain, post-Brexit, would become again a free country with the capacity to respond to and to meet its needs and desires. Britain is here imagined: as an island (echoing both Farage and Johnson, one respondent opines, "we are an island nation"); as a once-great nation with the potential to be great again; as a "great country" with its own commonwealth and with a "great imperial history"; as hopeful for the future and as optimistic about that future ("most of us are optimists and look forward to facing the challenge of new trade links with economies that are booming in the rest of the world"); as 'free', 'open', 'strong' and 'prospering'; as great in the past, as betrayed by Europe and the choice for Europe in the recent present and with the potential to be great again in the future; of Brexit as a liberation (738).

This is positive and positional in two senses. The first is that what is valued positively here—independence from other (European) nations and European institutions, freedom and the capacity to respond unilaterally to domestic concerns, demands and desires—is rejected on the other side of the debate. None of these are shared virtues, at least in the context of Brexit.[7] The second is that the greatness anticipated here is only attainable through the successful negotiation of the challenges that the choice for Brexit would entail (and that 'remainers' would have us avoid).

Arguably more positional, still, are those arguments which chime more closely with the unofficial Brexit campaign, focussed as it was more narrowly on immigration and border control. These typically build from a viscerally negative and often at least tacitly racist portrayal of the present: "the country is full"; there are "too many foreigners"; this is "an island … with finite space and resources"; we have the impression of "living in a foreign country"; "you walk down a street … and all you hear are different languages or English with a foreign accent" (738-9). This is visceral, typically experiential, and invariably links local experiences to the desire to leave the EU via connecting processes like immigration or EU regulation. It is also staunchly positional in that what is connoted positively and negatively are highly emotive, charged, divisive and politically contested questions.

In all these respects, then, the evidence would seem strongly to support the Brexit-remain divide as a significantly positional-valence divide. But why is that so important? For one very simple reason.

[7] There are clearly scenarios in which independence, freedom and the capacity to act without obligation to others might well be regarded as valence virtues. But in the context of the Brexit debate they are not.

Crucially, when it comes to turnout, positional politics motivate, stimulate and thereby elevate participation in a way that valence politics do not. Positional politics, in other words, trump valence politics if not every time, then probabilistically.[8] And here, for once, the verb, 'to trump', seems quite apposite.

Here, too, the Mass Observation Archive is interesting. For though they are few, where diary entries combine positional and valence motifs, there is only one winner. Consider the following two examples: "my head says we should stay in, whilst my heart calls for me to come out"; "I would rather be a poor little Englander than a poor and oppressed vassal of the EU". Needless to say, both quotes come from self-declared leave supporters (Moss et al. 2020, p. 843).

As this perhaps also suggests, the Brexit campaign was ultimately very effective at neutralising and successfully countering the valence strategy of its adversary. This was done by both explicitly challenging the direct appeal to evidence or expertise as bogus and disingenuous (as the appeal to 'their' expertise rather than to expertise per se) and by directly matching empirical claim with empirical counter-claim. Once again, the Mass Observation Archive reveals the success of such a strategy. The following table contains a series of quotes, each from a different respondent (Table 3).

Table 3 The discrediting of valence, evidence and expertise

"The public is being bombarded from every angle with opinions about which decision is right or wrong …";
"For every argument there is a counter-argument";
"We cannot believe any of them";
"Apparently there are facts to consider but amazingly these can be totally different depending … which camp you belong to";
"I don't actually trust most of the leading campaigners or believe that any of their 'facts' are true, whichever side they're on";
"I find it hard to know what to think";
"The only facts are what we know and experience and which affect our daily life";
"Like most people in this country I am dependent entirely on the propaganda showered upon us by the various activists";
"So many questions and no solid answers

Source Mass Observation Archive; Clarke and Moss (2021), Clarke et al. (2023) and Moss et al. (2020)

That the appeal to fact, evidence and expertise could be so effectively discredited and thereby neutralised in this way was a major triumph for the positional Brexit campaign over its valence remain opponents.

No less significant was that this visceral and populist positional politics of Brexit mobilisation typically also deployed a national (and nationalist) vernacular—in both

[8] It is important to be clear here. My argument is not that a campaign conducted in positional terms is bound to triumph over one conducted in valence terms—the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum is a clear case in point. Rather, I suggest, a campaign conducted in positional terms is more likely to secure a higher level of turnout amongst its support base relative to one conducted in valence terms. Indeed that, I would suggest, helps to make sense both of the surprising closeness of the vote in 2014 and the perception that 'Yes' won the campaign whilst losing the Referendum (see Henderson et al. 2022).

the official and unofficial Brexit campaigns, but more clearly and divisively so, of course, in the latter (with the 'taking back of control' of the border from the edicts of free movement placed at centre stage).

This had implications too for how the 'Br' in Brexit (the 'post-exit Britain' of Brexit, 'the Britain that Britain would become through the choice for Brexit') was imagined. On the remain side of the debate, Britain after Brexit was one half of an (almost exclusively) economic and (less frequently) geopolitical counterfactual, constructed to demonstrate (or at least to reveal) the economic illiteracy of a choice of this kind. In the process, Brexit was often reduced to an expert-determined relative economic cost. Most explicitly in HM Treasury's modelling, but elsewhere too, Brexit was essentially reduced to the difference in GDP per capita between a projected future scenario in which Brexit occurred and one in which it did not (a long-run loss of £4300 per annum per household, it turns out).[9] The Britain reimagined in the imagination of Brexit, here, was an economic unit not a political one.

On the Brexit side of the debate things could not have been more different. Here, Brexit and the Britain that Britain would become in and through a choice for Brexit were both imagined in staunchly political and staunchly nationalist terms. In and through Brexit, Britain would be liberated from the shackles of European oppression and the deadweight of European bureaucracy. Thus liberated and with its rightful sovereignty restored, its borders and decision-making autonomy as an independent and great nation re-established, it would rediscover the path to a greatness temporarily thwarted by European misadventure. In so doing Britain might find again its rightful place in the world as a benign, progressive and liberal force for good, fulfilling in the process its almost divinely ordained historical destiny.

However naïve and even disingenuous such an imaginary might have seemed even at the time and perhaps even to those giving voice to it, it was visceral, powerful, captivating and energising; it was also at times almost jingoistically nationalist. And its brand of nationalism, especially in the unofficial campaign, came very close to a racist antipathy to the liberal multiculturalism that consecutive administrations since the 1990s had embraced more or less enthusiastically. It was personified by Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP, who brought the implicit content of 'dog-whistle politics' back into the audible range (which meant that the official Brexit campaign, led by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, didn't have to).

Given all of this, we might not expect to find too many similarities between the Britain in Brexit imagined by Brexiteers and that imagined by remainers. But there is one striking and perhaps surprising similarity between these two otherwise entirely antithetic imaginaries.

In imagining Britain after Brexit, neither Brexiteers nor remainers projected Britain *as Britain*. Britain might have been reimagined in the imagination of Brexit but Britain as a multinational nation was not reimagined at all. Given the differential

[9] HM Treasury. 2016. 'HM Treasury Analysis: The Long-Term Economic Impact of EU Membership and the Alternatives'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hm-treasury-analysis-the-long-term-economic-impact-of-eu-membership-and-the-alternatives. On the many substantive flaws in their accounting, see Hay and Semken (2021).

support for Brexit in its constituent nations (indeed, in the constituent nations of the United Kingdom), this is perhaps less surprising when it comes to the Brexiteers' idealised imagining of British greatness after Brexit. But it is still interesting that the Britain reimagined in the imagination of Brexit by Brexiteers is devoid of internal national differentiation. Brexit does not have any place-specific or constituent-nation-specific consequences. Implicitly, Britain will benefit from Brexit in an undifferentiated way and Brexit will have no implications for the internal politics of Britain itself.

More surprising in a way is that the same is pretty much also the case on the remainer side of the debate. Even HM Treasury's estimation of the potential damage inflicted by imagined Brexit (in fact, imagined Brexit**s**, since a variety of scenarios were explored) remains jurisdictionally and geographically holistic—with its headline projections (estimated GDP per capita losses per household) reported for the UK economy as a whole. That might be excused in part by the inherent methodological difficulty of estimating the prospective effect of a shock like Brexit even for the entire economy, and the narrowly economistic rendering of Brexit on which the modelling was (rather inevitably) predicated. But the more general lack of consideration, by remainers, of the potentially highly differential effects—political, cultural and economic—of Brexit on Britain's constituent nations and, above all, the implications for the already fractious internal politics of the Union cannot be so easily excused.

The exception here is perhaps the Brexit debate in Scotland (on which see, inter alia, Henderson et al. 2017; McEwen 2018; McHarg and Mitchell 2017). But without the same kind of reflection on the post-Brexit politics of the Union south of the border, this was easily dismissed (by English remainers just as much as by Brexiteers) as Scottish nationalists wilfully exploiting the EU referendum to make the case for a second Scottish Independence Referendum. Either way, neither the Brexiteers' idealised imagined Brexit, nor the remainers' demonised imagined Brexit, nor even HM Treasury's spuriously dispassionate and spuriously precise cost–benefit analysis imagined Brexit offered any imagination of Britain as Britain after Brexit.

That raises, I think, a rather fascinating question. Given that the imagining of Brexit and of Britain in Brexit was never likely to prepare us well for the Brexit that Brexit would turn out to be, to what extent might 'actually existing Brexit' provide some kind of reality check on the Brexit imaginaries that brought it into existence?

'Actually existing Brexit' as a reality check

Might the Brexit that Brexit is turning out to be prompt or even require a reimagining of Brexit and of the Britain imagined in and through the projection of that Brexit? And, if so, how and to what extent?

Given my argument so far, it might seem reasonable to think that 'actually existing Brexit' might indeed impose a reality check on, and that it might even serve to recalibrate, imagined Brexit. But things, I suggest, are not so simple—above all in

the realm of the imaginary. For it is very possible to think that it might not have such an effect, for two rather different reasons.

The first is that imagined Brexit and the Britain imagined in the image of that Brexit might in effect be accepted, and in a sense excused, by citizens for belonging to a particularly idealised kind of imaginary.

Such imaginaries, it might be suggested, are the fictional and fictitious stuff of dramatised referendum electioneering. They are never likely to be realised and perhaps never even intended to be taken that seriously. They are certainly not offered as glimpses of a credible future—and as such cannot be made subject to a simple test of verisimilitude. Imagining Brexit prior to Brexit, particularly in a context in which a vote for leave seemed relatively unlikely, was akin to an act of collective dreaming. And one can continue to enjoy the memory of the dream long after the curtains have been drawn back to reveal the cold light of day.

In this kind of understanding, the Britain imagined in the imagination of Brexit by Brexiteers during the Brexit campaign might, in a sense, be seen as a rhetorical Britain and a rhetorical Brexit, the test of which could never be—and was never going to be—its correspondence to actually existing Brexit. It might also be pointed out that there is not a great deal of political capital to be gained from the equivalent of waking the sleeper from her blissful state of slumber.

It is surely interesting here that the most recent polling data, that from Public First's for UK in a Changing Europe conducted in May and June 2023, suggests that less than half of those who voted for Brexit but who now see Brexit as 'going badly or very badly' regret having done so. That suggests that even those Brexiteers willing to accept that Brexit, to date, has proved a failure see this as a failure of implementation rather than of imagination per se.

Second, even if it were accepted that a credibility test or reality check of this kind is in effect already underway (as the sleeper slowly regains consciousness), that might not be sufficient to prompt a reconsideration of the merits of Brexit itself. For there is an inherent interpretive ambiguity in attributing any difference between a pre-imagined scenario and its realisation to the credibility (or otherwise) of the idealised projection from which it arose. If imagined Brexit and actual Brexit are not one and the same, it need not follow that it is the imagination of Brexit that needs recalibrating. Plenty else other than the fantastic nature of the Brexit delusion might explain (or explain away) a less than ideal Brexistential reality.

Here, again, the polling data are instructive. For although 43 per cent of respondents do now expect Brexit to turn out badly or very badly in the long term and 52 per cent think Brexit has turned out badly or very badly to date, there is far from majority support for a second referendum (as Tables 4 and 5 show). But there is clear majority for 'making efforts to form a stronger relationship with the EU'—and even amongst those who voted leave in 2016, those who would support a stronger relationship with the EU outnumber those who oppose it by more than two to one.

Table 4 Support for a second referendum
Would you support the UK holding another referendum on whether to rejoin the EU?

	Total (%)		Voted leave (%)		Voted remain (%)	
Strongly support	25	44	5	12	51	75
Support	19		7		24	
Neither support nor oppose	16	16	15	15	12	12
Oppose	10	33	16	68	5	9
Strongly oppose	23		52		4	
Don't know	7	7	4	4	4	4
N	4005		1471		1550	

Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe (26th May – 2nd June 2023)

Table 5 Support for a stronger relationship with the EU.
Would you support the UK making efforts to form a stronger relationship with the EU?

	Total (%)		Voted leave (%)		Voted remain (%)	
Strongly support	31	64	11	43	51	84
Support	33		32		33	
Neither support nor oppose	21	21	33	33	10	10
Oppose	5	10	10	19	1	2
Strongly oppose	5		9		1	
Don't know	6	6	4	4	3	3
N	4005		1471		1550	

Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe (26th May–2nd June 2023)

What is also interesting about this is that, above all in the absence of a major political party capable of winning a Westminster majority and committed before its election to a second referendum, it makes reversing Brexit practically impossible—at least in the absence of a cathartic and disruptive moment (a point to which we will return presently). At the same time, the far greater public support for renegotiation also makes such a commitment itself less likely. The point, as it so often is, is one of sequencing. If and insofar as Britain seeks successfully to renegotiate the terms of Brexit, in accordance with the seeming desires of the electorate expressed above, it is likely to reduce whatever support for a second referendum exists today. If renegotiation comes first, it would seem to preclude a reversal of Brexit, at least under the prevailing political conditions.

In such a context, Brexiteers argue, and will no doubt continue to argue that the Brexit that Brexit has thus far turned out to be is not the Brexit that Brexit will ultimately turn out to be—or could ultimately *have* turned out to be. In so doing, they point, and will continue to point, to a range of factors: from the (perceived or constructed) hostility and intransigence of EU negotiators during the negotiations (and subsequently) to the disruption of the supply chain associated with the Covid crisis and now the Ukraine–Russia conflict. They might well also argue that if Brexit never turns out to be the Brexit it was imagined to be this is because

others have played a role in undermining the potential of 'their' Brexit. Brexit has been betrayed. That Brexit has not turned out to be the Brexit it could have been, in other words, is not because imagined Brexit was ill-conceived, incredible, idealised or (literally and figuratively) fantastic; Brexit, for them, has simply been poorly implemented.

There are, then, good arguments for thinking that the imagining of Brexit—and, more significantly, the imagining of the Britain that Britain might be under conditions of Brexit—is not likely to be subject to any significant kind of a reality check. The implication is that the acceptance of Brexit (at least by those who voted for it) is unlikely to diminish if, and to the extent that, Brexit disappoints.

But that I think starts to stretch credulity. For it is still plausible, even given the above caveats, to imagine that actually existing Brexit (and actually evolving Brexit) do still present, on an almost daily basis, some kind of reality check for imagined Brexit and its projected Britain. It is also credible, I think, to envisage that a certain divergence of actual and imagined Brexit might just prompt a moment of catharsis or, indeed, a more incremental process of reappraisal.

What makes that more credible are the extraordinary stakes for Britain as a political unity and as a nation of 'Brexiting' (the process in and through which Brexit turns out to be what it turns to be). For, as I have sought to suggest, those high stakes were not anticipated in the imagining of Brexit—not really even by the remainers. They were not in the script; they were not really in *any* script. Above all, Brexit, it seems, turns out to be credibly corrosive of the very Britain it was intended to liberate and in ways that were not difficult to anticipate.

Let me conclude by reflecting on two potential elements of this—the former very current and ongoing, the latter more prospective and hypothetical.

The first is the still ongoing supply chain, and related labour market, disruption afflicting the UK economy. To focus the discussion, let us consider just the situation at it was in the autumn of 2021 (it has hardly improved markedly since). This saw widespread and significant disruption in each of the constituent nations of the UK, with fuel shortages at the pumps (if not in fact at the oil depots) and shortages of many essential (and, indeed, less essential) goods in the high street. There were very long waiting times for ambulances in many parts of the UK (necessitating the drafting in of troops as replacement ambulance drivers in Scotland) and shortages, too, of both essential medical equipment (including sample bottles for medical tests) and essential medical staff. This resulted in many cancelled or postponed operations and the delay in the autumn flu vaccination programme. More significantly still, high projected global demand for gas supplies, a heightened British reliance on imported gas from Norway and the EU since around 2000 and the comparative lack of the infrastructure to store gas was generating significant anxieties about the need for fuel rationing over the winter months.[10]

[10] See, for instance, David Sheppard (2021) 'Why Europe fears a gas crunch even before winter demand begins', *Financial Times*, 15 September 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/7c31ca15-aa4f-4a32-bb90-ebc1341ed374.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this led albeit briefly to the return of the familiar Winter of Discontent motif in the popular (and not so popular) press—a theme, of course, that would return and endure longer a year later.[11] In late 2021, Boris Johnson found himself the latest to be re-cast in the role of the beleaguered Prime Minister of the day, 'Sunny' Jim Callaghan, who returned from a summit in the Bahamas in January 1979 and was at least reported to have dismissed suggestions of a crisis with the infamous phrase, 'Crisis, What Crisis?' (Hay 2009).

It is never good for an incumbent British Prime Minister to be compared to Jim Callaghan and that the press should have been warning of the dangers of a new Winter of Discontent suggests that a certain Brexit reality check was already underway—especially as the government responded with a temporary exemption on post-Brexit visa restrictions for hauliers and tanker drivers.[12]

The sheer fact that they did so makes rather less credible their claim that such supply-chain disruption was exaggerated, had little or nothing to do with Brexit, was a near-universal experience in the EU too and, in the extraordinarily hyperbolic and misguided terms of Kwasi Kwarteng, the Business Secretary, would not see a repeat of and return to the 'three-day week' of 1974 (in an official and scripted statement to the House of Commons on the 21st of September 2021).[13] But whilst it may well have served to reinforce impressions that, to date at least, Brexit has not quite turned out the way it might have been hoped to turn out, I suspect that at least at the time most of those who voted for Brexit were still dispositionally inclined to accept the government's own argument that these pathologies were more an effect of Covid than they are of Brexit per se.

The second set of reflections on the potential for 'actually existing Brexit' to provide a reality check on imagined Brexit and reimagined Britain requires us to build a hypothetical, if until quite recently a rather credible, scenario (one made somewhat less credible by the resignation, as First Minister, of Nicola Sturgeon). That scenario is that in and through a combination of factors including the experience of Brexit, the pressure for a second Scottish Independence Referendum might grow either to the point where it became irresistible or, perhaps more credibly, easier to concede to voluntarily, however, grudgingly—above all, for a Conservative Prime Minister with a substantial (if now much more fragile) majority grounded in English and Welsh votes.[14] The scenario (probably) also requires a vote in favour of Independence too in the resulting referendum.[15]

Were that to happen it would lead, it seems even more credible to assume, to the initiation of a bitter and protracted negotiation of a dis-unification treaty. This

[11] *The Daily Mail*, 20 September 2021; *The Sun*, 21 September 2021; *The Guardian*, 21 September 2021; *The Independent*, 22 September 2021; *The Telegraph,* 24 September 2021.

[12] With the announcement, on 25th of September 2021, of an additional 5000 visas for foreign lorry drivers (Associated Press, 27/9/21).

[13] In more detail, he stated, "There is no question of the lights going out, of people being unable to heat their homes. There will be no three-day working week, or a throwback to the 1970s" (Associated Press, 20/9/21).

[14] Under Johnson in 2021 this was reasonably credible but two years and two Prime Ministers on and it is a lot less credible.

[15] But even in the absence of a vote in favour of Independence (sufficiently large to ensure that it passed), it is still credible to think that a not insignificant, and potentially cathartic, reality check would be precipitated.

would, in effect, bring the Britain in Brexit to a premature conclusion and that would be likely to make the negotiation of the Brexit deal itself look like an amicable parting of friends in comparison.

This is a purely hypothetical scenario and not in any sense a prediction. But if Brexit were to lead to the break-up of Britain itself, it is difficult if not impossible to imagine this not being regarded as some kind of reality check, requiring the most significant reimagining of Brexit post-Brexit and, indeed, of Britain post-Britain-and-Brexit. Whilst it is far from clear that any Brexit-engendered break-up of Britain would necessarily constitute, or even be seen as, a failure of Brexit per se, it seems difficult to imagine that it would not provide the context for a yet more intense, more febrile and more visceral reimagining of this most imagined and reimagined of nations. We would, in effect, have turned a page and found ourselves in another chapter of the saga of this fractured and sceptred isle.

Conclusion

That is, of course, to envisage—to imagine, to project—an immediate future in which the imagining and reimagining of Britain takes place in a context at least as fraught, as turbulent, as febrile, as divisive and as viscerally political—and as collectively and consciously focussed on the nation itself—as it has since a vote for Brexit was first envisaged. But such moments are, of course, unusual in the life of any nation.

The nation is more normally made and remade, as Anderson was keen to remind us, through the rather less conscious, rather less consciously political and more iterative practices of routine social interaction in and through which national symbols and imaginaries are invoked and in the process reproduced and incrementally modified on an almost daily basis.

At some point Britain, or what remains of it after the Brexit episode is concluded, will return to something resembling that—normality, if a new normality (and for constructivists, of course, all normalities are new and contingent). The traces of Brexit and of the Britain imagined and reimagined in and through its idealisation, its demonisation and, ultimately, its realisation will be there; but they will slowly blend like fibres into the rich tapestry of ideational and cultural resources on which future imaginings and reimaginings will draw.

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