

The Fragility of Goodness: Brexit Viewed from the North East

Just over a month ago I spent a Sunday evening giving a talk in a pub in Sunderland. It wasn't a talk on Brexit, but rather on the core issue that coursed through the veins of the Brexit debate: *migration*.

The evening's revellers were made up of the local Catholic community who had invited me to speak at their local, the members of an Iranian church who turned up in number following their evening service, a group of Nigerian and Indian students and migrant workers and the local Sunderland white working class men who make up the more typical Sunday evening drinking crowd.

Perched on a stool at the end of the bar, just beneath an enormous screen showing *Britain's Got Talent* for those whose interests quite understandably lay elsewhere, I gave a talk on the way that Catholic social thought provides resources for thinking about the current migrant crisis. It was an evening when I was (unsurprisingly) cheered and heckled in equal measure: political theology as a fittingly extreme sport.

At the end of my talk I suggested to the crowd that rather than a standard question and answer session, we would get much more out of the evening if we attempted to have a "common good conversation" about migration - one in which we attempted to speak and listen with respect to the diversity of views and experiences in the room, searching for a sense of our common humanity and shared interests but aware of the real differences that should not be ignored. If we can't get that right in a pub in Sunderland, who are we to expect our politicians to do any better?

The first contribution came from a middle-aged working class man who had listened intently to every word of my talk. He spoke at length about his sense of the world. In summary he presented the following case: I love people, I'd do anything for anyone, but what's wrong with the world is religion, it births division and evil. And what's wrong with accepting migration is that these migrants are all religious, and mainly Muslim. Syrians or Turks, they are going to bring division. Muslims disapprove of us and of our way of life. How do I make friends with a stranger, a co-worker? I invite them for a drink after work, for working men the pub is the heart of the community: we form bonds by sharing a pint. But my Muslim co-worker won't drink with me, won't do what men around here have always done. It's a way of judging us. I want to live in a real community that works hard and knows its neighbour, where we look out for each other. That's what we used to do around here. But I can't do that with people who are really different to me, with whom I have nothing in common.

As he was talking one of the local parishioners, a retired nurse, walked towards the man and put her hand on his shoulder. When he had finished she told him that she shared his sense of the loss of community and that she too wanted Sunderland to be a place of real neighbourliness. But, she explained, her experience of nursing at home and abroad had given her a rather different perspective on religion, on reasons to welcome migrants and ways to build relations with Muslim neighbours. This was the beginning of an exchange more revealing and

important than the talk that preceded it.

My Sunderland interlocutor finds his views echoed in much of the recent Brexit debate. The institutions that were meant to guarantee our common bonds, to ground our common life and were meant to foster a decent life for communities like ours have broken or proved themselves false and fair weather friends. Migration (real and fictional/anticipated) is indigestible. There is mourning for the loss of "settled" community. And so, the last utopia for many is not human rights but the nation-state. In the face of precarity and the erosion of communities, the protector of the local and the fragile becomes the national: the nation-state as a vehicle for memory and aspiration. Watch the UKIP campaign videos replete with fighter pilots and 1980s cricket heroes if you don't believe me.

Despite collective (cosmopolitan) surprise at the prevalence of such a complex sense of loss and aspiration (I will come back to the aspiration part) there is not much new about this. These are pan-European (now global) trends that [Tony Judt](#), left-wing public intellectual and self-described Euro-pessimist, wrote about two decades ago. He believed that European elites were failing to grasp that the narrative of "Europe" stood increasingly for the winners, the wealthy regions and sub-regions of existing states. The losers were "the European 'south', the poor, the linguistically, educationally or culturally disadvantaged, underprivileged, or despised Europeans who don't live in golden triangles along vanished frontiers." It turns out much of the post-industrial English North feels rather like the European "south."

Judt argues that what is left to such Europeans "is the nation, or, more specifically nationalism." Distinguishing between two forms of resurgent European nationalism, one characterised by movements for regional separatism in which regional identity operates in association with a larger transnational unit (think Catalans or, closer to home, Scottish nationalism), and the other based on an appeal to some contemporary version of the nineteenth-century state invoked as a protection against the dislocations brought by globalisation, he argued that if the latter trend was left unaddressed the European project would crumble.

What Judt did not foresee was the intense interaction - of action and counter-action - now taking place *between* such nationalisms: a political stage shared by Nigel Farage and Nicola Sturgeon, as politicians of the so-called "extreme centre" vanish. Nor did he see the potential for the vast and complex coalition of interests that the Leave vote brought together. Which prophet could?

But Judt did see the real possibility of an emboldening, not so much of a civic nationalism rooted in institutions, but of an ethno-nationalism of blood and soil, which appeals to many of those who feel themselves to be outside of - or to despair of - civic institutions. Once emboldened by elite and opportunist political leaders (who understand few of these political undercurrents and are unlikely to be its victims, and whose hubris is to imagine their leadership will be respected by such groups) this particular breed of nationalism is a truly terrifying force, a sterile and negative political force nonetheless capable of very great harm. The considered political response to the gradual polarisation of our political culture was to ask a binary question, and then be pained when the fault lines emerge in sharp relief, and simmering sentiments of racial hatred break into the open.

Discourses of theodicy, nationalism, pluralism, liberty and globalisation are bound tight around each other in the conversation of the post-industrial North East. It is less a question of bringing theological perspectives to bear from the outside than spotting that these *are already* theological conversations in so-called secular spaces. Read the case made by my Sunderland friend again if you aren't sure. As [Luke Bretherton](#) argues, this is about *theodicy*.

For many Labour leave voters this is the moment when Thatcherism, never voted out of office, was finally given its electoral kicking. For others, their desires are expressed as a vote against more recent immigration, precarious and pointless work, and a visceral desire to kick back against an establishment who appear to despise and humiliate low-wage workers. It is about resisting humiliation and dehumanisation. Much of this, of course, has nothing to do with the EU. But that doesn't matter much. It is a judgement on the neo-liberal politics of Blairite Labour as much as Thatcherism; it's a way to understand what you do with grief.

In the face of this kind of political emotion, the lacklustre Remain campaign focused on jobs and economic security, but it did not connect or inspire with a robust vision of the good nor did it name the humiliation and dehumanisation many feel and seek to explain how a genuine European Union could take this up into its own political core and offer new forms of participation. To rephrase the late Judt: "Just as an obsession with 'growth' has left a moral vacuum at the heart of some modern nations," so the abstract quality of the idea of Europe presented by Remain proved insufficient. "The mere objective of unification is not enough to capture the imagination and allegiance of those left behind by change."

But we make a huge error of judgment if we suppose that these conversations are only motivated by loss or suffering or by a politics of fear or hate. This is to miss at our peril the palpable sense of aspiration addressed by my Sunderland interlocutor and many others like him for certain kinds of common goods - an orientation towards the good of a living in a community of people with faces and names, with the possibility of purposeful existences and a desire for a responsive politics, of the desire for a kind of common protective humanity that many now middle-aged working class communities did not experience in their childhood encounter with religious institutions.

And so any credible Christian theological response that desires to resist and overcome the binary Manichean logic of good and evil so prevalent in our culture needs to handle the presence of *both* a felt sense of loss *and* aspiration, suspicion *and* resilience, betrayal *and* pride, as Augustine might say - *ad permixtum*. The fault lines of the referendum result run through the human heart, not simply between classes and communities. A Christian metaphysics requires us to handle the complexity of these mixed up motivations with care.

Pope Francis astutely and disconcertingly notes that a culture in which compassion is absent from politics - for all, not just for our various preferred characters - more likely than not has first experienced a failure of civil society and its intermediate bodies. We stop being properly human with each other in and between our localities first, and then we find we cannot sustain communities of welcome for more distant neighbours whose very lives depend upon it. Brittle and exhausted democracy, a lack of political resilience, a struggle to grasp and respond decisively and with leadership to the duty to near and distant neighbour, the difficulty of talking

about the goods rather than interests we want our politics to pursue: all this becomes the thin soup sustaining a weak body politic.

To be clear: there are good reasons for those who voted Remain to grieve, for there are tangible goods that will be lost and it is unclear that we have political mechanisms in place right now to secure our common wellbeing. But that grief must retain its attachment to its real object: the pursuit of the life of the common good. Our divisions are publicly exposed. There must now be a genuine process of listening beyond silos - and make no mistake this will be deeply unsettling. What and who (who on earth?) will enable us to recognise the devastation of our political culture - a devastation many years in the making - but do so in such a way that we are also able to recognise the fragile possibility of the new political community that might already be buried alive underneath the rubble? This is ground that a new generation of political and church/religious leaders must speak to: leaders that we are calling forth from where, and how? This is territory wide open for those with ears to hear and eyes to see.

In the pub in Sunderland no great settlement was agreed, no revolution in thought occurred, but at the initiative of a local church stepping beyond its settled ground a community with firmly held and very different views on immigration, was briefly, for a few hours, in fruitful dialogue with itself; a dialogue that was not for its own sake alone in response to the need to discern duties to global neighbours in urgent need.

We need not only new leaders and a commitment to processes of robust open-hearted dialogue, but also new spaces of civic encounter - new ways to address my interlocutor's question: when money is scarce and civic institutions are largely gone or viewed as irrelevant, *where* (rather than *how*) do we form bonds of affection and a sense of shared life across different classes, ethnicities and faiths?

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