Fantasies of freedom: EU referendum highlights English fear of being small part of something bigger

Europhobia is at the heart of the campaign for the UK to leave the great European Union experiment. Fantasies of freedom: EU referendum highlights English fear of being small part of something bigger. Those campaigning for Britain to leave the EU emphasise the loss of sovereignty that membership entails. But the fear of being part of a larger entity is a very English complaint

Europhobia is a better term than Euroscepticism for opposition to British membership of the EU. A phobia is an irrational aversion, while scepticism is a state of reasoned doubt. Euroscepticism, a mere doubt about the sustainability of EU structures, is not in itself a ground for leaving them. Europhobia is an instinctive revulsion, and like other phobias it is a symptom of a deep psychological disturbance – in this case, a crisis of identity.

An anonymous Scotsman, interviewed by the BBC on the streets of Edinburgh when the date of the referendum was first announced, saw straight through all the bluff and bluster that was to follow. Asked to comment on the difference between English and Scottish views of the EU, he replied that, through belonging to the UK, the Scots were used to being part of something bigger, but the English, as the dominant party in the kingdom, were not. There you have Europhobia in a nutshell: the morbid fear of being part of something bigger, and it is a specifically English disease. At its heart is the question of identity, of who the English are and what England is – not Britain, but England. If we concede that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, then we have to define our own character and limitations and history, and give up our childish dream of omnipotence.

The origins of the English aversion to finding their identity in a larger unit are so ancient that they now lie half-forgotten in the national subconscious, which is why much of the current argument seems instinctual rather than rational. For over 400 years, the English sought to efface their identity in their pursuit of omnipotence, concealing themselves from themselves and from the world under the name of Britain and the British Empire. Since the end of the Middle Ages at least, and arguably since the

Norman Conquest, England has been the metropolitan territory of an empire, the dominant partner in a cluster of colonies with which it has been economically and constitutionally integrated.

England, by the end of the nineteenth century, survived only as an administrative designation for a regional grouping of counties, and as an informal and sentimental way of referring to the global colossus that was the British Empire. Monarch of all it surveyed, the Empire was – almost – a world to itself. For the essence of an empire is its striving to make its political and economic reach coterminous, so that within its wider still and wider bounds it is omnipotent, or at least self-sufficient. Of all the European empires, the British came closest to realising that ambition: there can be nothing bigger on the planet than an empire on which the sun never sets.

That illusion of self-sufficiency, of being a nation which is part of nothing else and which can decide its destiny without consulting anyone else: that is the most seductively damaging bequest of the British Empire to the patchwork state, not yet 100 years old; that is its diminished successor – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, established in 1922. This bequest is the prime motivator of Europhobia. The demand that the UK should assert the sovereignty of a nation-state is an attempt to recover the autonomy that only an empire can enjoy, which is why Europhobes often sound like nostalgic mourners for a lost era: "I want my country back."

But even "Britain" is a delusive fiction, a second, and equally potent, illusion bequeathed to England by the Empire. The term "Britain" was invented to conceal that England's relation to Wales, Ireland and Scotland was that of coloniser to colonised: the British Empire had an English Empire at its centre, the true character of which was concealed by the pretence that we were all "British" together. That local empire continues to this day in the constitutional arrangements that give England its privileged position in the UK, and until it is acknowledged, and the kingdom reconstituted as a federation of equals, the ghost of the defunct but greater Empire will continue to haunt the English in dreams of lost independence and lost global standing. The Scots and the Welsh and the Northern Irish Catholics are not taken in by talk of "Britain": they know that they are junior partners in an enterprise bigger than they are and they prefer to speak of "the Union" or "the UK", which, given their sense of their own nationhood, they cannot think of as a "nation-state". They therefore have no objection to adding a further layer to their identity as partners in a bigger Union still, that of Europe. According to YouGov, the most Europhile constituencies in the UK lie in Wales and Scotland (while for the Catholic Northern Irish, EU membership links them uncontroversially to the Irish Republic). But the English still cling to the old imperial notion of a unitary Britain and still use "British" and "English" almost interchangeably. Safe, it thinks, within "Britain", the last redoubt of Empire, Europhobic England can imagine itself as independent of anything bigger, unaware that it is undermining its own foundations. If there is a majority for "Leave" in the referendum on 23 June, the result will not be "Brexit", for the dissolution of the union between England and Scotland that is likely to follow will at last reveal to the English that "Britain" is a figment and that the identity of each of the separate nations that occupy the Atlantic Archipelago is historically, politically, culturally, spiritually and of course geographically inseparable from that of the European mainland.

Throughout the period when it was building its own empire, England focused its foreign policy on preventing the rise of a competing continental empire. Time and again it has divided Europe in the name of the balance of power, so that no single European hegemon could emerge. Helping to frustrate the ambitions of a Louis XIV or, above all, of a Hitler or a Stalin, were heroic acts for which Europe

and the world will always be grateful, but it is less clear that other would-be Caesars deserved such obstinate opposition – Charles V, for example, or even Napoleon, whose fall left Europe east of the Rhine and south of the Pyrenees a prey to arrogant and reactionary tyrants for 100 years. Winning the war against Napoleon, and transferring French and Dutch overseas possessions into the Anglosphere, prepared the global dominance of the British Empire in the nineteenth century and of the English language in the twentieth and twenty-first. But it does not follow that English Europhobes, obsessively rewinding memories of the Empire's finest hours of resistance to continental ogres, are justified in trying to break up a European Union of republics, whatever its Napoleonic inheritance. There is no point in refighting the battles of Marlborough and Wellington when there is no longer a British imperial alternative to protect and when the disaggregation of the EU, which the departure of the UK might well bring about, would be a catastrophe for the world order.

England is unique among European nations in not having been an equal or subordinate part of some greater institution for nearly half a millennium. Even France has repeatedly suffered invasion and occupation, as indeed have Ireland and Scotland. But England is not for that any better placed to understand what it is to be a nation in the post-imperial world – on the contrary. The world constructed after 1918, and reconstructed after 1945, is a world of thousands of overlapping international agencies and supranational authorities, from the UN and the WTO to the International Whaling Commission and the International Organization for Standardization. England now has a crisis of identity because it cannot imagine what it is like to belong, and in the modern world you can be a nation only by belonging.

Five hundred years ago, however, England did belong. The great project of building an empire, centred on England, that came to encircle the globe began with a refusal to belong to anything bigger. England cut itself off from a Christendom centred on Pope and emperor, and asserted, in Henry VIII's Ecclesiastical Appeals Act (1532), that "this realm of England is an empire". In the centuries that followed, the Atlantic Archipelago was subdued and subjected, the overseas territories were accumulated at the expense of Spain, France, and the indigenous peoples, the concept of Britain was coined, wars between England's European rivals were provoked and prolonged, and eventually the civilising mission of the white man was proclaimed to the world, all in the name and in the defence of the Protestant interest. From the sixteenth to the twentieth century, English imperial autonomy and English religious autonomy flourished together, and together they declined. It is not chance that the fading of imperial thinking in 1960s England coincided with the fading of inherited Protestant belief. There remain, of course, in England and in Northern Ireland, those who still subscribe to both, who still refuse to belong. For Europhobia is the last redoubt, not just of the English and British Empires, but also of the English Reformation.

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