

The young people betrayed by Brexit in the vote for Europe



Two young people from Edinburgh wrapped in the European Union flag (AGF)

From global London to the Leave capital Stoke-on-Trent, via Oxford, Manchester and Newcastle. The voices of young people who feel abandoned, betrayed or excluded from politics but went to vote for their Union
by Francesca De Benedetti

STOKE-ON-TRENT, THE ISLAND OF LOST YOUNG PEOPLE

The capital of all the gaps (as well as being the Leave capital, which received 70 per cent of the vote here) is in the North. It is a town of 250 thousand inhabitants, and it's called Stoke-on-Trent. Once upon a time this periphery had a centre: the mines and potteries, production of some of the world's most famous ceramics, blast furnaces shaped like huge red-brick cones. They can still be seen today, like fossils from a prosperous past, a couple of metres from a bench on which a jobless man passes his time, a few metres from the town's bingo hall, on the same city block as the Potteries Museum. Post-industrial archaeology: today, in place of the quarries and factories, it's the large YMCA building (the same Young Men's Christian Association that inspired and gave a title to a song by the Village People) that brings crowds of people together in Stoke; there is a sign pointing to it on every corner. It is a reception centre for young jobless people who have no dinner and no home, no family or prospects, and no motivation. It offers hospitality to at least 120 kids a night.

This Stoke is angry with Brussels and wants to flee from Europe because it has already fled from itself. *Leave* is an SOS message cast into the sea in a bottle. Here, mental illness has also become a social problem. They know this well at the YMCA, and I become aware of it when I seek shelter from the hail in a club and nearly get a punch in the face for no reason. "The little disappointments young people experience - a girlfriend who leaves them,

the things you usually get over, can create voids if you've grown up without a family, you don't study and you don't work", Jerahl Hall, a Youth Ambassador at the YMCA explains to me. He's 26, and has spent 10 years working at the centre (he started when he was 16, initially as a volunteer in the kitchen, and now he's a spokesman for the young people's demands).

ABANDONING EUROPE BECAUSE THEY'VE BEEN ABANDONED

Jerahl tells me that his friends are mostly Remainers, but adds that many young people here "don't even know what the European Union does. To tell the truth, they don't even know who the Prime Minister is – they think it's still Cameron. We suffer from a very low educational level here". And although Hall is "proud", even though "we're trying to lift our heads up again and get our voices heard", and even though not far from the bingo hall the faces of thousands of young people from the city have been stuck up to form a collective piece of art called *The Face of Stoke-on-Trent*, the social landscape has virtually been torn down here. Not by Europe, but by Margaret Thatcher's deindustrialisation plans first, and later by the crisis and David Cameron's austerity.

The numbers tell us that just 10 years ago the ceramics industry employed 50,000 people; now it's 7,000. The recollections – of Jerahl – say even more: "Our parents tell us that if you wanted a job in the 1980s, you found one immediately. It might have been a humble one, you went down the mine or into a factory, but a job was there. The first blow came during the Thatcher government: a load of factories closed down, and the 2008 crisis did the rest. Today, production is less than 20% of what it was in the 1980s. Now you have to go outside the city, and if things go well you'll find work as a night-time security guard, in a call centre or in a bingo hall, because there's even a lack of places to get together. The lack of opportunities and the feeling that you mean nothing to politicians has made room for extreme right-wing movements here", says Hall, "and it led many people to vote *Leave*, although even in Stoke, the people who like Europe the most are us young people".

MANCHESTER, THE LITTLE LONDON OF THE "PIIGS"

Not all the northern cities feel abandoned by politics and Europe. Although the former industrial towns now have virtually no lifeblood left, the larger cities have been able to transform themselves, and have begun to hope again. Manchester, for example, where the Remain vote was 60%, proudly displays posters opposite the University reporting the EU funds it has received (the figure is at least 50 million pounds for research alone). In this "Little London", where many young Europeans are now opening businesses, "when Leave won, people even brought us flowers to the restaurant door as a gesture of solidarity" say Elisa Cavigliasso and Davide Rinaldi, who left Turin to open the Pasta Factory here ("more easily than in Italy", they say), in the Turin of England (since Manchester is also a former working-class city that has converted to the services sector).

Here, people who used to be known as PIIGS – Portuguese, Italians, Irish, Greeks and Spanish, the "poor Europeans" from countries that are not growing, "PIIGS" who have only spread their wings in a few cases, and who often continue to seek their fortune in the UK – not only don't want England to "argue" with Europe, but also feel excluded from the decision to leave. Professor Dimitris Papadimitrou, for example, who directs the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence in the city, is convinced "as a Southern European that it's better to stay in the

Union, and students feel the same way". Steven Stokes, an Irishman who now lives in the city, remembers "the high cost of the divisions: the IRA set off a bomb in Manchester, and we don't want the fear to return", and as a Liberal Democrat he sides with a second referendum "just like we Irish did for the Treaty of Lisbon". None of these Europeans were able to express their feelings on Brexit, because although many of them had been residents for years, if not decades, they were not British citizens. They vote in the European elections, but amidst a general disorganisation. They cling to Europe as if to an inevitable scenario. The South, with London's finance and services and its global universities, simply cannot conceive of any alternative.

OXFORD, THE (GLOBAL) ISLAND THAT DOESN'T EXIST

If Stoke-on-Trent is the "Island of Lost Children", a town left to its own devices by policies that target Europe in order to attract attention, Oxford, on the other hand, is "the (global) island that doesn't exist": here, opportunities are the norm, and a blend of different origins is the rule. Professor Lapo Bogani leads me through a majestic dining hall that was one of the sources of inspiration for J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts. He shows me a university chapel "where until a short time ago a woman priest who is married to another woman held the services". He leads me through this crossroads between tradition and innovation, and finally into his laboratory. Here, young Scandinavians, Germans and Asians all have their backs bent over computers and data. They're working on the "materials of the future".

Simen Sopp, 28, from Norway, knows what the "exit" means: "I pay the same fees as overseas students, and they are much higher. Today, EU citizens, who until now have paid the same as English students, are risking the same fate". His German classmate – at Oxford, 16% of students come from the EU, as do 18% of the staff – is convinced that "things won't change very much for a university as prestigious as this one. It's the others who will have the problem". But even in the "island of excellence", uncertainty weighs heavily. A young Italian researcher, Andrea Pisauro, is trying everything – including petitions like *Take a Break from Brexit* – to avoid leave, and above all fractures. Dominic "Dom" Brind, an Oxford history student, has virtually given up his studies to be a leader in the young people's pro-EU movement "Our Future, Our Choice": "We can't end up at the mercy of old people's imperial nostalgia", he tells me. He has even challenged Farage to a "verbal" duel.

Brind is happy to choose his representatives in Strasbourg. Here, the antibodies (to Brexit) are very active, and the stakes are high. If I move from Bogani's hard sciences to the humanities of the criminologist Federico Varese, the conclusions are harsh: "Critical thought is at risk with Brexit", the professor tells me. The fact is that a major slice of research funds comes from the EU (£74 million in 2015-16, 14% of total funds), and although it's usually the "hard sciences" that attract them with "concrete" projects, the resources are then redistributed within the University in such a way that human sciences can "survive with dignity" too. "Without Europe", explains Varese, "we will feel the blows of the national government's austerity. European funds are fundamental for critical disciplines, those that tell the truth in spite of the powers-that-be". But with Brexit?

BETRAYED BY CORBYN? THE FOUNDER OF MOMENTUM

Let's get back to the young people, since in 2016, the year Leave won, the Eurobarometer described them as pro-European. Disaffection with the Union, the data told us, increases

with age, and educational level and wealth also make a difference. It's the sense of opportunity that makes a pro-European, therefore. Why not defend this opportunity? In London, I put this question to Adam Klug, the co-founder of Momentum, the grassroots movement that was mostly established by young people in 2015, and which has contributed to the rise of Jeremy Corbyn. Today, wandering around London at the anti-Brexit demonstrations, I come across young people of little more than 20 holding up posters that say: "Corbyn, you've betrayed us. We won't forgive you". They condemn his Brexit line, which they believe to be "inconsistent".

Why not prevent this feeling of being excluded from decision-making, why not fight for the Union from below, as Momentum has been able to do for Corbyn? Klug replies that "even though most Labour Party members were pro-Remain, we young people find it embarrassing to campaign from the same pulpit as the Conservatives, those same people who wrote the policies to cut public expenses and the austerity policy. Yes, we wanted Europe, but not a Europe of the status quo. This is why many of us were unable to make the necessary effort. The 2016 Remain campaign, which was supported both by Conservatives and Labour, didn't tell us young people about a Europe that can change. It didn't talk about hope".

LOCKED OUT OF GOVERNMENT? KEN LOACH'S NEWCASTLE

From Newcastle, Marianne Amor, a pro-European and the force behind the local movement Diem 25, adds another piece to the puzzle. We are in the city where milkshakes were thrown at Nigel Farage, the city of the canteens of *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach shot the film in Newcastle). Here, Labour is trying to reinvent itself under the banner of the Green Deal and green industrial transformation. "Young people", says Marianne, "feel powerless because politics has betrayed them for many years. I'll give you a concrete example: before 2010, the Liberals promised to do away with university fees, which were around £3,000, and so they won the votes of many young people. When they then reached an accord with David Cameron's government, they agreed to them being tripled: far from zero pounds, we now pay 9,000! We took to the streets, we protested loudly and in large numbers, but our protests were repressed equally harshly, and hundreds of young people were arrested by the police. In August 2011, the police opened fire and killed a man of colour, young people reacted with the London riots, and the government responded with arrests (including preventive arrests) and repressive new laws like the Snooper's Law. We also supported Corbyn after these events, but now discontent, distrust and boredom are winning. A lot of young people feel they have no horizons, and they're depressed".

GOD SAVE THE KIDS

It is no coincidence that polls taken at the end of June 2016 found that only 36% of young people between 18 and 24 years of age, and only 58% of people between the ages of 25 and 34, voted in the referendum. Today, whether they are pro-European or not, young people feel betrayed: the leavers of Stoke feel even more abandoned by politics, while the London Remainers try to cling onto a united Europe. In the capital, everything is global and interconnected, and Europe seems an inevitability: crowds of young people gather in pubs to defend it, people like the members of Vault London, who meet at Blackfriars Wine Bar, and are mostly Italians. In Hyde Park, I meet 17-year-olds like Alex, who is from Cornwall. They are certain that "if we'd been able to vote too, Brexit would have been out of the

question". And yet in the meantime, the sense of betrayal and exclusion grows as the stalemate persists.

"I put my head in my hands and want to bury myself when I think of how we used to make fun of you Italians and laughed about Bunga Bunga" says Professor Charlie Beckett at his desk at the London School of Economics. Seven minutes' walk from this prestigious global London university, "Bunga Bunga Covent Garden" sells pizza, "*bungatini* and fun" in memory of times past. "These days, on the other hand", continues Beckett, who knows Italy well, "I don't think we English people have anything to laugh about. We are in a quagmire, a political stalemate. I often talk about it with my students: it's hard to feel that you are neither out nor in". Excluded, that is.

Betrayed twice: betrayed by a Brexit they didn't want, because most of them are pro-European, and betrayed by a political class that doesn't know how to choose, because three years after the referendum, Brexit is still stuck in the mire. The young people of the (Dis)United Kingdom went to vote to choose 173 British Members of the European Parliament knowing that they had to be ready for anything (remaining, staying, staying halfway in), but certain of nothing. Before leaving Europe, Great Britain has left the youngest people on the sidelines: those who wanted Remain and those who voted Leave or didn't vote. From the south of the country to the north, they tell us that they feel they have been left on the margins because they were unable to find a dream on which to base their hopes either in English politics or in today's Europe, and with the political impasse in Westminster, this gap could only grow wider.

"Bye bye Europe? Bye bye politics": Three years later, the lack of faith in their representatives – which was the X factor in Leave's victory – has deepened. This is true for the Remainer professor from the prestigious university who, together with his students, is ashamed of the politicians, and it is true of the fans of Nigel Farage whom I met at the bus drivers' canteen in Sheffield, who are more and more angry (it's no coincidence that the polls tell us that the Brexit Party is leading in the European elections). And it's even truer for the youngest people, who are for the most part pro-European, but who feel excluded and betrayed. They are "fed up", they say.

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