Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast
Episode 16: ABOUT BREXIT, BELONGING AND BRITISHNESS AMONG UK CITIZENS IN FRANCE

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About the episode

With the new year we thought we would turn things up a notch and introduce some of the sociological themes from the project. In this episode, Michaela reflects on her research talking Brexit with UK citizens in France to turn attention onto questions of belonging. She focuses in particular on how Brexit has raised questions for them about their sense of themselves as British. It asks the question of what it means for them to be British in Europe in a time of Brexit.


Transcript

Michaela Benson: Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. Happy new year and welcome to our first full-length podcast for 2018. I hope that over the Christmas period you enjoyed our micro-podcasts and, because I grew to love the sound of my own voice by recording those, I thought that I would start 2018 by bringing you an exclusive episode that's just all about me and my research, well kind of. What we want to do moving forwards with the podcasts is to start to introduce you a little more to the research that we've been doing and introduce the sociological perspectives that we are taking on the issue of Brexit and what this means for British citizens who have made their lives and homes in the EU 27 so today I'm going to talk to you about Brexit, belonging and Britishness focused on the case of the British in France, the populations that I've been working with in the Lot and Toulouse. But before I move on to the topic of today's podcast I wanted to bring you up to date with the research. I've spoken previously about what we've been doing to communicate the research but I'm not quite sure that people out there have a good sense of what we've actually been doing, so I thought that it would be good to share that with you.

I've been in France over the past six months, I've spent about two months out in the Lot and in Toulouse talking about Brexit with British citizens who've made their homes and lives there and I think in this time I've spoken to something in the region of a hundred people and conducting interviews with them about their lives and what Brexit means to them. These are people who've come from a range of backgrounds and have different life circumstances and that's in relation to work,
relationships, family and of course they have different attitudes towards Brexit. So that's what I'm going to reflect on today with a particular consideration of how Brexit impacts on their sense of where they belong, of their place in the world. You can also read my initial thoughts about the case of UK citizens living in France on our blog, I think there's perhaps four or five different blogposts that I've written based on that research that I've been doing in the Lot and Toulouse, but also you can listen back to episode 6 of the podcast or episode 11. I'll put all of these links and the others that I refer to throughout the programme onto our home page along with the information about this podcast, so this will appear in the show notes below the podcast detail.

And while I've been doing research in France, Karen has been out in Spain and she's talked about Brexit with something in the region of 70 people and we've also had Mike Danby who's working with us doing some research with young British people who are living in Granada, and we hope that we'll have something from him quite soon to put onto the blog about that. Karen's written about her research in Spain for the blog and she also spoke about it on the Brexit podcast. In respect to our citizens panel, Catherine has signed 150 people up to the citizens panel and these are people who live across the EU 27, they've been feeding back to her with their thoughts on topics that include citizenship, migration, the language used to describe them. We've got some lovely stories from them on our conversations with the British in Europe feature on the website, so take a look there if you want to find out more. She also wrote an excellent, I think I described it as a ditty, for our 12 days of Brexit Brits abroad feature, and as if that wasn't enough Chantelle has been working closely with parliamentary records to track where and when UK citizens living overseas are mentioned within these records, and how they're represented. We're going to do a future podcast on this, but suffice it to say it's really fascinating to see where and when and in what ways British populations who live overseas are represented. She's also been conducting interviews with UK citizens of colour who've chosen to live and work in the EU 27 and wrote a really excellent blogpost about this for our 12 days of Brexit Brits abroad feature.

But today I want to talk to you about how Brexit is causing some of the people that I've been talking to in France to question their sense of belonging, their place in the world we might call this. This is a really common theme within research on migration so this question of where people belong and how they identify following migration, and it's been the focus of a lot of the work that Karen and I have done in our past research on Britons living in France and Spain. My way in to thinking about this question of belonging was in reflecting on the responses from British populations living across the EU 27 to the announcement on the 8th of December that sufficient progress had been made in respect to citizens' rights. Now, just a little reminder, citizens' rights was one of the areas of discussion of negotiation between the UK government and the European Union that needed to be agreed before discussions and negotiations could move on to talk about trade, and first thing in the morning on the 8th of December 2017 there was an announcement, I remember hearing it at about 6.30 in the morning, that the European Union had agreed that sufficient progress had actually been made on issues around citizens' rights along with questions about the Irish border and several other things that had to be negotiated as first priority. Over the course of that day and into the weekend it became really abundantly clear that sufficient progress as agreed
between the UK government and the European Union was being deemed as insufficient progress by British populations living across the EU 27 as well as by the European Union nationals living in the UK. Of course this is a very serious issue around rights and their continued ability to live and work in the places that they've called home, but I think that there is also something else going on here that goes, that tells you what these rights mean to people from the points of view of their identity, their sense of where they belong. I think that the sense of betrayal, neglect and sacrifice that was prominent in the limited media coverage of how these British populations felt about the announcement of sufficient progress with headlines including things like sacrificed on the altar of trade, which was how the Guardian reported it. I think that this sense of betrayal, neglect and sacrifice actually kind of translated, captured quite accurately some of the anger, indignation and despair of these British populations. What it did was make visible a sense of disorientation, a question of where do we belong, who has our back, I mean I think that this was a really central question in the way that they were approaching this announcement, and it really did seem to kind of coin a phrase that they'd shifted from first priority to the back of the queue so this idea of first priority, the UK government have repeatedly insisted that citizens' rights was a first priority, and yet it seems that for many of the people that we've been speaking to, that they didn't feel that they were being made to be a first priority and certainly what they see as progress on citizens' rights perhaps further confirms for them the fact that perhaps they weren't first priority.

But it's also clear that they used this idea that came up a little later around the issue of the reissuing of passports, so that after Britain's exit from the European Union we will have blue passports again and they played on this idea of being pushed to the back of the queue so from first priority to the back of the queue, this phrase really does clearly communicate the questions around who and whether there is any interest in supporting British populations who live outside of the UK. So I'm going to unpack this sense of disorientation a little bit more today and I'll reflect primarily on my interviews with Britons living in the Lot and Toulouse. I'm going to talk specifically about how they discussed the question of whether they are still British or in what ways they are still British, of how they experience Brexit as something that makes them feel perhaps less than British, or differently British. Importantly, in comparison with the previous work that I've done with British populations living in France it's really notable that these questions around being British have taken on a renewed significance in light of Brexit. Now what do I mean by that? What I mean by that is that before, people might talk about how moving abroad perhaps had made them reflect a little more on what it meant to be British, but it wasn't necessarily something that was at the forefront of their minds in the way that I've been witnessing while I've been in France, and I'm going to give just two examples, one of these is an allegory that I came across repeatedly while I was in the Lot. It's an allegory that concerns driving in Britain on French licence plates. The second is the way that people reported to me being told by their compatriots back in the UK that they were traitors or deserters, how they found their allegiances questioned on the grounds that they've chosen to live abroad. So let's just start with this allegory, and I'm going to start with two quotations that I think capture this allegory of driving in Britain on French plates, particularly well.
The first is from John. He'd been back to the UK driving around with his father in the car. ‘There was one occasion one Sunday morning, I took my father who’s no longer here, but I took my father to the waste tip and we had to stop at the top end of the road. And I was waiting to turn left, waiting for traffic to go round and as we pulled from one road into the other off the roundabout there's a chap and his wife in a car and they yelled the most obscene abuse at us, and my father was absolutely perplexed because he was sitting in the passenger seat which was nearest to the people. What's all that about? he said. Well, the only thing I can think is that it's because we happen to be driving a French car. I think we were right’. 

Keith told a very similar story. ‘We get the finger on the motorway, just because they don't know what nationality. I'm driving a car with French plates and we've had cars go past us on the motorway not doing anything wrong, and sticking their finger up at us as they're driving past us. It's awful, the anger and the hatred we find in England now, we just cannot believe it. This again, this year we were almost driven off the road, we were going round a roundabout. I knew the road, I was born and bred round that area’. 

Talking Brexit with the British in the Lot, this story about driving in England on French plates repeatedly came up. It had either happened to the person narrating, or to somebody they knew. It might be presented as a reason for being wary about driving to England, the story is clearly allegorical, and to me this communicates that for these people, these Britons who have made their homes and lives in the Lot, they feel acutely that they have been ignored or overlooked. But it also communicates their ambivalence about Britishness, their sense that Britain has become unfamiliar to them over time, as well as a concern that they are no longer recognisable to their compatriots as British, and I think it's notable that the places they talk about this happening in are often familiar places. For John, this was the town that he had lived for most of his working life and that his father still lived in, and for Keith, as he says, he was born and bred in that area. So familiar places here become unfamiliar. 

The second example is the way that people reported to me that they had been labelled as traitors and deserters. Now these are very evocative terms, but they came up repeatedly over the course of my conversations with these people as they told me about conversations with their compatriots around voting, particularly around their right to vote in the referendum, and it seems very clearly that they found their allegiances being questioned, purely on the grounds that they no longer lived in the UK, but also they were painted as people who no longer had an interest in the UK and no longer had the UK's best interests at heart, so very frequently within this there might be discussions around whether they were contributing to the UK, normally coded through the discussion of whether they were paying taxes. So I'm going to start again with a couple of quotations. The first is from Laura. And she very succinctly presented this particular problem.

'We're the people who've been labelled traitors for leaving the UK. How can I have been? I just don't understand, there were no jobs for us in the UK. We have to feed three kids, we weren't going to go on benefits. We moved to where the jobs were, and we're totally legal, totally proactively, and yet now we're told oh you left, you shouldn't have a say, you shouldn't have a vote, you're traitors. Oh well,
you should just come back you know, and you’re like there’s no empathy. So it's very clear from this quotation from Laura that she deeply felt this labelling of her as a traitor, and she objected to it. It's very clear that she's objecting to that labelling there. She wasn't the only one, there were many others for whom this labelling was presented as they talked about how their compatriots related to them.

Dan and Anna were a couple in their 40s and they'd been living in the Lot since 2005. We had a really extensive conversation about the right to vote and their feelings about this, and as part of that they discussed how they had responded to the criticism that they shouldn't have a right to vote, particularly in the referendum, so I've just put together this extract from some of the things that Dan particularly was saying.

'I got called a traitor of my country, sorry a deserter of my country, for leaving my country and therefore I didn't deserve a vote. But people were angry that we had the opportunity to vote and I said well I'm sorry this really affects us, why shouldn't we have the right to vote? In fact we should have the right to vote as long as we still have a British passport. I explain my reasons for wanting to vote and naturally we voted remain. Voting in the general election and referendum is very important for us. But I don't think that we should be allowed to vote in local elections in the UK as in when they have local council elections and things because that's none of our business, we're not living there anymore, but when it comes to something that's so big, that's for the country, changing the country, I think yes, we should absolutely.'

What comes across very very clearly is that the UK for Dan is still his country. He refers to it repeatedly as my country. He also feels very very strongly, as that quotation communicates, about his right to continue voting. As part of the conversation we had, they made very clear that one of the objections that people had to their continued right to vote was their misconception that they no longer paid taxes in the UK, and they highlighted time and time again that they did pay tax in the UK still, for various reasons. But I think that Dan also points towards voting as a fundamental right of democratic citizenship. He highlights that he still has a British passport, indicating that he is still a British citizen, and it's on these grounds that he is claiming his right to vote as a practice of citizenship. So what's very clear in this extended quotation is that discussions about voting, drawing questions about what it means to be a British citizen, as much as what it means to be British.

I hope that those two examples have given you a little bit of a flavour of how these British people, who've made their homes in France, feel about the question of whether they're British. And just for a little more context it became very very clear in looking across and working with them that Brexit Britain was a country quite different to the country they'd left, this was a very very strong narrative emerged. It was somewhere that did not recognise them, as we've seen in the case of driving in the UK on French plates, which had seemingly no place for them and actually, as we start to move into kind of questions about how they feel about the way that the citizens' rights negotiations are going on, it becomes very clear that this is further exacerbated by a sense that the British government, to their minds, no longer cares for them. They feel that Britain, that the UK had let them
down, but they also feel very clearly that they no longer recognised Britain as it was, this idea of Brexit Britain was presented as a kind of a new and cruel era, something that they did not want to be part of. And what we see is that through these Brexit linked discourses, they carve out new identities for themselves, what we could refer to as a new space for belonging, and this is where I think the sociology gets quite interesting.

What we see in these identities, in these emerging identities and these merging claims to belonging, are spaces where they can be differently British, as we've seen in Dan's quotation. Being British still meant something to people, even if the form of Britishness that they associated with Brexit wasn't one that they could sign up to, so instead they carve out a new space for themselves. And this might have been a process that started earlier in their lives in France, so for example in the kind of renewed awareness of their Britishness as a consequence of leaving Britain, of moving to a place where culturally things are a little bit different, socially things are a little bit different, so it might be that they'd already started, there'd been this kind of nascent sense of themselves as some kind of British other, brought on by that project of migrating. But it's very very clear that that question of what it means to be British, to coin a new intensity in response to the outcome of the referendum and the move towards Britain's withdrawal from the European Union.

So from a sociological perspective, these brief examples offer signals of the emergence of an identity of being British abroad, or perhaps what we might refer to as being British in Europe, and as we start to see this emerging on a wider scale, and in a future episode I'll go into some more detail about the qualities of this sense of Britishness. We're starting to see groups forming around a common set of values focused on what it means to be British living abroad, and I think we see this with some of the campaign groups for example around the rights of these British populations ad Brexit.

So just drawing it to a close for today, really what I wanted to point to here is the way in which Brexit is recasting the identities and belongings of these British migrants, as they find themselves faced with the question of whether they are British and what it means to them. I'm sure that some of you recognise these questions around identity and belonging, and I hope that you've enjoyed this brief foray into the more sociological themes of the project. As we progress, we'll be doing more podcasts like this, as well as of course inviting in some of those voices of British populations who live in the EU 27 to come and share with us their experiences of Brexit and of living abroad. But for now, thank you.

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