



Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast

Episode 39: [Can you be British and European?](#)

First broadcast Friday 1st February 2019.

About the episode

In this episode, Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly talk with Sophie. Brought up in Belgium, attending one of the European Schools, Sophie reflects on being educated to be a European citizen. Brexit has made people question taken-for-granted identities, and while what it means to be British has taken centre stage in public debates, for many of those taking part in our research this exists alongside questions of what it means to be European. For some people, this is very deeply felt, revealing that being European extends beyond its rights basis, shaping identities and supported by value systems. Brexit then, is experienced as a fundamental challenge to ways of being and belonging as they find that their identifications as British and European are made incompatible.

You can download this episode of the podcast at <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep039-can-you-be-british-and-european>

Transcript

MB: Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. I'm Dr Michaela Benson, a reader in sociology at Goldsmith's University of London and the research lead for a UK in a Changing Europe funded project that's all about what Brexit means for British citizens living in the EU 27. Over the coming weeks and months you'll be hearing me in conversation with the rest of the team, with Karen O'Reilly, Catherine Collins and Chantelle Lewis. Today I'm really pleased to welcome Sophie, who's written for us on our blog and in the Meet the Brits feature about her experience of growing up in Brussels and what it means to her to be European. I'm really excited about this because actually one of the big themes that we seem to have covered repeatedly on the podcast and through the project is the question of what Brexit's done to the extent to which British people in Europe feel British but for some reason, and I'm not quite sure how this has happened Karen, but we haven't really focused on people being European in the same way, even though that does come up in the interviews quite often. And with that in mind I think it's really exciting to bring Sophie in to talk about

Europeanness and to try and understand a little bit about how that interplays with being British because I think that, well I suppose it's up for debate the extent to which those two things are compatible, incompatible or coexist. Sophie d'you want to start by explaining a little bit about how you came to be living in Brussels.

Sophie Yeah, so I'm British, I was born in the UK, both my parents are British, I lived in the UK until I was 3 years old at which point my dad got a job with the European Commission in Brussels, so we moved to a small town just outside of Brussels and we've been there ever since basically.

MB: I mean at the moment you're studying in the UK I know that, but up until that point, and this is something that kind of captured the imagination of the project team when we received your blog post, was you have quite an unusual, well I would say an unusual educational experience, which is that you were educated in what you describe as a European school.

Sophie Yes, so the European schools are basically a network of 14 schools which were established incrementally since the 1950s by the European Union, they basically aim to provide a mother tongue education for the children of EU institution employees, and they're divided into language sections which deliver lessons in an official EU language so the idea is that all pupils are able to receive an education in their mother tongue, and different schools have different language sections but they all have a kind of core of English German and French, and then different ones on top of that. So the schools have a common curriculum and this education model is very broad with a strong emphasis on language learning, and eventually the, all pupils do the European Baccalaureate which is the qualification that's unique to European schools, it's basically the equivalent of A levels. So to kind of really understand what the European schools are about and how they work, you kind of have to look at the context of emergence, so they were really designed to kind of serve a political and ideological purpose because they were set up in the 1950s alongside the Treaty of Rome. So in that sense they were kind of a practical exercise in peace and cooperation between states which had previously or not so long ago been at war, so it was kind of another aspect of cooperation alongside economic cooperation which were happening at the same time, with the European coal and steel community for instance. So because of that origin the European schools are committed to an ideal of European unity and they're really engaged in quite an explicit attempt to produce European citizens which you can see in their mission statement which says that quite clearly. But at the same time as having this European dimension they were also designed to provide expatriate EU officials with an alternative to educating their children in the national school system of their country of residence. So for instance a French EU official living in Germany wouldn't have to have his children educated in the French school system. So kind of as a result of both these ideological contexts and the practical reasons behind them, the schools have a kind of dual aim which is to foster a sense of European identity among pupils while also preserving a national cultures and languages at the same time.

Karen Fascinating. So who were you going to school with, tell me a bit about the people that you were at school with.

Sophie Well in my particular school we had seven different language sections, so you had a mixture of, well to say that they were British students is not entirely true because it was an English Anglophone language section, so the students were not all British per se

but mostly their mother tongue was British. So I was in the English section or Anglophone section, but at the same time there were also French pupils, German, Dutch, Greek, Spanish and some Czech and Slovak pupils, so it was all just basically a big kind of melting pot of nationalities and languages.

Karen So how much time of the day are you spending in your Anglophone section or doing stuff in your own language?

Sophie Well it kind of depends on the stage of the school, so if you're at primary school everything apart from like a second language is in your mother tongue, but then with secondary school gradually things start being taught in your second language which for me was French, and then at the same time as having these lessons in different languages you also have just socialising with other students in the corridors, at break times and things like that, so a good amount of it was in your language section but it kind of depended on the person as to whether they felt they wanted to socialise outside of that language section.

MB I think quite a lot of people are very familiar with the idea that British people who live in Europe when they have children they either put them into the national education system or they put them into a British school, and I was kind of thinking that the European school, if we think about what those British schools are also trying to do as well which was, it's not just about providing children with an opportunity to learn in their first language, it's also about training them to understand particular national cultures and identities, which is actually true of most national education systems anyway, we know that for example if you go and you learn history in a British school you are going to learn ...

Karen ... mainly British history.

MB Mainly British history.

Karen Or from a particular perspective.

MB Yes, so it's quite interesting to think about it, as you say ideologically as well and perhaps you could reflect a little bit on what it meant to be studying for example history or geography in a European school, how, I mean it's difficult because of course you're only at school in the European school so you don't really know what it's like in Britain.

Sophie Yes exactly. Well in answer to your question history and geography specifically in secondary school were taught in the second language. For most of my secondary school education I learnt history and geography through French, which was just completely normal at the time, we didn't really question it, it was just the way the system was, and in theory it was meant to be a harmonised curriculum but I think inevitably because of the teachers teaching was, French in my case, so she probably put a bit of a French spin on things so to speak, and similar things happened in the English and German history and geography language classes. I was obviously aware that this was quite a different system, it's different to the way things work in the UK and in Belgian schools for instance but at the same time because it was what I grew up with I didn't really register that until I tried to explain how it works to people at university because they would always ask where are you from and then I'd explain the whole story, and end up explaining about the European schools and it's very difficult to explain what it means and hearing about other people's experiences is what made me realise that it was quite a unique thing to go through.

MB What the ambition behind these schools were was to promote a sense of European integration to some degree, while also allowing for those, that particularity, those kind of allowing I suppose a celebration of some of the national cultures that go into making up this project of Europeanness but what does being European mean to you on an individual level?

Sophie I think it works on many different levels. I think in a broad sense for me, being European is about valuing other cultures and languages, it's about feeling connected to people all over Europe, but I suppose the way I see it from a specifically E European angle so to speak, so the EU being a kind of key framework for my European identity, and from that perspective it's also about a belief in the European project, it's about supporting the goal of future integration and the belief in the need for cooperation and working together, so that's quite important for me. But then I think at the same time it's something that I'd always taken for granted, having grown up in an explicitly European environment, it's not, as I said it's not something that I ever really thought about until I went to university in the UK. And I think it does actually resonate on a number of levels because on the one hand it's something that I've grown up with, and I think it's easy to see the EU as a kind of faceless bureaucratic entity or think about Europe as an empty idea if you're not confronted with it in your everyday life, but because I've experienced a kind of tangible cultural linguistic side of it and it's played such an important role in my education, I think I probably see it differently to most people. I think there's also a strong practical element, so the practical benefits of freedom of movement around the EU, the right to work, even things like the common currency and I think to me part of being European is being able to take advantage of these things. And equally I think to me European identity kind of fills a sort of gap that I have, so although I've always felt British I've always kind of felt distance from a British identity in a geographical sense not living in the UK, and also culturally, but then at the same time I would never describe myself as Belgian, so given that I think the idea of Europeanness functions as an additional sense of identity, which is something that I found as well when I did my dissertation research on this topic. I found that a lot of people, who had quite complex identity positions, so they were for instance half Spanish or half German, but had always lived in Belgium and had a strong connection with the English language, they just were in such a complicated position and they never really felt fully at home anywhere. So to them the idea of being European was solution to all that complexity, so I think I feel that on a slightly less pronounced level.

MB And that was your dissertation for your undergraduate degree which was all about the European school and --- being educated in the European school. I think that you've started to tease out some of the complexities about Europeanness and I was wondering before we started how we might even define what being European is. I mean it's one of the things that we have struggled with on the project, what does it ...

Karen It's been fascinating actually because I was just thinking about this just now coming on the train actually, how also Britishness but Europeanness as well are actually very difficult things to articulate, and obviously Brexit has really made us think more, all of us, not just us on the project but the people we interview and talk to we've all started thinking again what does Britishness mean, what does Europeanness mean, but it's really difficult to actually articulate it, to actually put it into words, and one of the things, I don't know if you relate to this at all Sophie, one of the things people have said to me, well for example it's where I started my life, so I have some childhood memories and these will be attached to a place so I have one person immediately comes to mind

actually grew up in Norfolk and so I have memories of Norfolk and Norfolk therefore is part of who I am, and that won't go away, so although I want to feel European I'm partly from Norfolk. Do you have any feelings like that, that your Britishness is something ...

MB Tangible, well feeling it can be located at a particular point in time or in a particular history.

Karen Or where you locate your Britishness or Europeanness.

Sophie Yes I think for me it's quite difficult because I moved to Belgium when I was 3 years old and I don't really have a particular place in the UK where my family are all from or where we lived before, I mean it wasn't, and I don't remember it as well, so I don't really, I've always struggled with having somewhere to call home in that sense, if someone says where are you from I say the UK, but if they want to be more specific than that then I really struggle to pinpoint it. So that is probably one of the reasons why I've always felt a little bit distant from a British identity. But then with going to university I think that helped me to locate, you know I finally moved back, what I consider to be back home, and then I had my place where I could kind of call my own place in the UK, but equally I think my, if you locate my British identity in that way I would say from a European identity it has to come back to the European school, because that is the place where everyone that was in the same position, most of the students in the European school are educated entirely in the European school, they don't really move around, most people are there from the beginning of nursery to the end of secondary, so in that sense it is a place that they might consider to be kind of home in a way or to locate their European identity

Karen You notice that people get drawn to people like them and that can be any kind of category that people like them, so it might be people who've come from a similar school in the past or who feel from a different nationality or it might be to do with class or it might be to do with interest or whatever, so who have you found yourself drawn to at university?

Sophie I'm not sure it's really worked that way, I think I ended up with a bit of a mixed friend group, although once by a complete coincidence I ended up sitting next to a girl who had also gone to a European school in Luxembourg at a formal dinner but that was a complete stroke of luck, but we realised we'd both been to a European school we were starting reminiscing and comparing what we'd studied in the European Baccalaureate and all that kind of thing, but I wouldn't say my education experience has particularly made me gravitate towards international students or anything like that, I think that would be a bit of a stretch from the truth.

MB It's really interesting I think it's, I think the other thing that you've teased out is that Britishness and Europeanness need not be mutually exclusive. So you've kind of highlighted the fact that yes you're European but you are also British. The other thing that becomes clear and I think this is why we've struggled with this question of what is Europeanness or even what is Britishness is because it seems that both of these things, they capture on one hand for some people and not for everyone a sense of identification, values which is something that you've really really strongly highlighted, and of course as has become apparent through Brexit a set of rights and entitlements which people feel very strongly about and which then translate into this kind of loss of a citizenship and I think it's really important at this point to highlight that for British citizens full stop, all British citizens after Brexit will cease to be European Union citizens, and so for British citizens who live in the EU who might have a strong identification in some cases

with that idea of being European, this is accompanied by a sense of loss, and I was saying before we started recording that one of the things that stuck with me most about from the interviews that I've done is the situation where I was interviewing somebody via Skype about her experience of living in France and also about Brexit, and I said to her about halfway through the interview I said to her what does it mean to you to be European, and I don't think that I had anticipated that this would be the outcome, but she broke down essentially in front of me on Skype, this is not a situation that you ever want to find yourself in when you're doing a Skype interview actually, and was inconsolable for two or three minutes, and I think to me that was very important in terms of communicating the depth of her feeling about what it mean to be European, I don't think that you could deny in that situation that she identifies as a European. And I think we've overlooked that a little bit historically in research with British people who lived abroad.

Karen Absolutely and something that at some point I really want to be able to write about but it's so difficult to write about it because people have found it's something not easy to express and I think absolutely being faced with challenges to your rights has definitely brought it to the fore and people, for the first time ever, have said to me over and over again, I'm not British I'm European, they never said that to me before. It's not that if I ask them do you think you're European they would say yes, most of the time, but I didn't want to put those words in their mouths, I wanted to see how they express their own identity and this is not what would come to the fore. Now it's really coming to the fore, I'm European, and a lot of that comes from this fear that they're going to lose these rights. But only last week I was talking to a group of people who would all call themselves European, all living in Tenerife, all, I think all of them fluent in Spanish, absolutely integrated, but all said they won't get Spanish citizenship unless they absolutely have to. We're British. So it's like yes, they're suddenly expressing their European identity but they're also suddenly expressing the sense of Britishness that wasn't coming out so strongly before as well, it's so fascinating.

MB It does go back to the point that we made in that earlier podcast about Britishness which is that this is a time at which people are starting to question again taken for granted assumptions about Europeanness might be part and parcel of that, along with Britishness. But before we close Sophie I just wanted to ask you, what does Brexit mean for you in terms of your sense of being European, of being British?

Sophie I think the fundamental thing is the realisation that my British and European identities are not necessarily fully compatible anymore. And in one sense identity is very personal, it's kind of what you make of it so if I feel British and I feel European then arguably nothing changes, but I'm still very conscious of the fact that a significant proportion of the British population voted against UK membership of the EU so against the connection between those two things, and that did come as a huge shock to me, especially because the balancing of those two identities and the fact that they are compatible has been such a key part of my identity, and what I learned in school, so I've been brought up to know that it's not that they are, they can be compatible but it's something that you should aim for, and that we should strive for having both national identity and European identity at the same time. You know I spent my childhood learning about the benefits of EU membership so to then have that taken away from me at this point, it's been quite difficult to come to terms with.

MB I think that's really common, that's something that we're picking up across the project from the people who felt that strongly identified with a sense of being

European, anger, frustration, upset, a kind of sense of the rug being pulled out from ...

Karen Betrayal, that's another word I keep ...

MB Betrayal yes, but I also think that it's very very clear that just as Britishness has multiple meanings for even the same person, Europeanness too can have these multiple meanings and it's very, how people feel about their place in the world is very very complex and tied up with all sorts of personal histories, biographies, experiences, conditions at particular points in time, all of those kinds of things. I think that the ambivalence that was definitely documented early on in the research that was being conducted on European identities holds true now, except it seems to have a different intonation for British people who live in the EU because of Brexit, and I think that this is probably just the starting point of us really understanding what it meant for British people to be European. So thank you very much Sophie.

Sophie Thank you for having me.

Karen Thanks Sophie.

MB You've been listening to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast, hosted by me, Dr Michaela Benson, and produced by Emma Houlton at art of podcast. The series is part of a UK in a Changing Europe funded research project, Brexit Brits Abroad, that's all about what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU 27. We're really keen to hear from you about the issues and concerns we address in the programme, so please do get in touch with any thoughts, queries and questions. You can find our contact details on our web page [brexitbritsabroad](https://www.brexitbritsabroad.com), or get in touch via social media, we're on Twitter @brexpatseu and we have a Facebook page Brexitbritsabroad. Finally, in case you're not already subscribed to the podcast, you can do so on both iTunes and Google podcasts. Thank you for listening, and I'll be back in a couple of weeks with the next episode.