



BREXIT BRITS ABROAD

Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast

Episode 41: [What does it mean \(if anything\) to be European?](#)

First broadcast Friday 8th March 2019.

About the episode

What comes to mind when you think of being European? This is one of the questions that comes up time and again in our interviews for the Brexit Brits Abroad project. It probably doesn't surprise you that there are range of different answers. In this episode, Michaela offers some insights into what it means to people—from rights and a set of common values to an identity and a sense of belonging—drawing from her interviews with Britons living in the EU-27.

And she speaks to Roger Casale, the founder of [New Europeans](#), the civil organisation championing Freedom of Movement and EU citizenship, about Europe in the everyday, Freedom of Movement as a misnomer, and the prospects for a European citizenship not contingent on nationality.

You can find out more about New Europeans' EU Green Card campaign at <https://neweuropeans.net/article/2628/european-green-card-proposed-solution>.

You can download this episode of the podcast at <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/what-does-it-mean-if-anything-to-be-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. But over the last few months of the project I thought it would be nice to try something a bit different with the podcast, to mix it up a bit, and today's episode is the first in my experiments in podcasting, so please bear with me. What I want to do over the coming months is really start to talk about the sociology of things, to really start to tease out some of those themes that have been coming out in our conversations with British citizens who live in the EU 27, about what Brexit means for them, but in particular what it means for them in terms of questions of identity, citizenship

and belonging. And one of the things that I keep coming back to at the moment is this question of what it means to be European. Across the project this is a theme that comes up time and time again, and I think it's important to stress that there are many different perspectives on the question of what it means to be European that are narrated to us by the people who are taking part in the research. You'll remember that a month or so ago we heard from Sophie in episode 39, she'd been educated in the European school, and here's a little reminder of what she had to say about it.

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 kind of 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.

MB What Sophie so clearly teases out in her account of what being European means to her is the way in which it exists alongside Britishness. She's very much an advocate of the idea that you can be both British and European, and indeed this is an understanding that underpins the work of many pro-European groups. I thought it would be a really good idea to bring a representative of one of those groups onto the show, so I asked Roger Casale, the founder of New Europeans, if he would share with me what being European meant to him, and just a caveat, this interview was recorded over the internet.

Roger What it means to me to be European is the ability to see my home culture if you like, well I think of Europe as my home now but I was brought up in the UK, English is my first language, and what becoming European has enabled me to do is to see all of that if you like from the outside, because it's given me the opportunity to travel, to work, to start a business, to fall in love, to get married, to have a family, to learn other languages and I've always been somebody who's been able to really live a normal life in other EU member states and the benefit of that has been huge, in terms I think of my own self-awareness and understanding, that I can see the limits of my own Britishness but also the things that are special, that make me special because I'm British but equally I can see how others see me from the outside because I can speak the language and I can see it the other way around and I can see others from the outside so if you like it's an added value that I've got, it's something extra that I have, it doesn't stop me being British, I'm British and I'm European as well.

MB So what you've described is a set of rights, an ability to move freely, to be one of those free movers so celebrated by the European Union. You've also described I think a set of values and an identity?

Roger Yes, free movement is a little bit of a misnomer really because I think a lot of people who just think about it in the abstract assume it's just the ability to cross borders, but your journey into another member state or into another society doesn't stop when you cross the border, in fact only just starting. I think one of the things about transnational EU citizens, I prefer to use that term rather than free movers, people who, yes indeed move from one member state to another but generally to take up work. The whole question of European citizenship becomes something very concrete, very practical, because it is linked to whether they can still get their pension in retirement if they decide to stay in their adopted member state, it's to do with access to health care, it's to do

with the documentation that they need when they are travelling from one place to another with pets in the car, it's to do with the whole series rather everyday banal sounding things that nevertheless matter, make a huge impact on people's day to day lives and so it becomes something, the recognition of their qualifications, it becomes something very practical. Free movement is something that is much more than just crossing borders. The opportunities are huge and the benefit to the individuals who exercise their right to free movement are potentially very great but I think it's also good for Europe and it's good for the member states of Europe and the communities where people from diverse backgrounds move to and live. And that's migration generally.

MB I completely share with you this understanding of free movement as a misnomer. I think that one of the things that I would like to bring you around to is exactly that question of you're pro-European, your pro-European identity, you strongly associate with that, but I think that you also recognise that as it stands there are some limitations to it which, I wondered if you could reflect on a little bit more.

Roger Yes there are limitations, we're at a very early stage I think of this. It's very much a question of Rome wasn't built in a day. I see it that's not a bad thing to reflect on because was Roman kind of citizenship was something that was much more open than the European one is because you could become a citizen of Rome without having been born in Rome and whereas in the case of European citizenship you don't have to be born in Europe but you do have to have a passport of an EU member state which of course some very very wealthy people are able to obtain in, and this is absolutely scandalous, by paying for, well famously a Maltese passport, a passport for Malta I think the going rate is about half a million pounds and you become European citizen in that way by obtaining a Maltese passport by paying for it. I think there are other states I think I'm not sure, Britain isn't completely clean on that front either. So I mean this is a serious limitation, this is a serious limitation, I mean if you can only be a European citizenship because you've got a passport of an EU member state then that is, that is a severe limitation and it is also, I would argue, something that is not really inherent or consistent with the type of European identity that we've been talking about, which is based on a much more open set of values to do with freedom and democracy and equality and solidarity, and the kind of European identity, kind of European citizenship that I believe in would be one that would be available to long-term residents of the European Union for example who are what's called third country nationals, who are not citizens of an EU member state. I think if we are serious about building a European identity and European citizenship then it shouldn't be a kind of ethnocentric identity, it should be an open international identity and if people choose to build their lives in Europe and they meet the criteria for living here, I'm not saying that we should have a completely open door immigration policy, I mean obviously you have to have a European border but equally we need safe and legal routes into Europe for migrants and refugees and we need migration and I think we need to take a view of this which is based on seeing that as a great asset to Europe and as part of the solution to the challenges we face in the 21st century, and I think that getting people to come into Europe from the outside to identify themselves as Europeans, to be able to say I am a European and I am a citizen of Europe is the best way to go in terms of building a strong case of society in the future, and so to accommodate that, to facilitate that, we need to look at what we mean by European citizenship and I think we need to open up that debate and I would like to think that at some point in the future it will be possible for somebody from Brazil or China or anywhere in the world who wants to be a citizen of Europe to be able to achieve that status by virtue of their being here and meeting the criteria, not just because they've got half a million pounds in their back pocket that they can slip over the counter in Malta and become an EU citizen that way.

MB That certainly gets around some of the issues that have been generated by quite punitive regimes around migration and citizenship. One of the biggest common comments on European citizenship and European identity is precisely the mismatch between the two, so I think people are aware of the set of rights, the status that is awarded to people on the basis of them being EU citizens, but there seems to be something of a vacuum when it comes to members of the general public believing in something called a European identity and I reflect on this from talking with British citizens living in France, some of whom, I mean one comment that sticks very, that comes to the front of my mind quite frequently is, she said you know when I think of a German, when I think of a British person, when I think of a Belgian, there's a silhouette that comes into my head, and when I think of a European that silhouette isn't there. What work d'you think can be done in order to build that sense of identity among people for whom it doesn't have quite the same value as it does for someone like you?

Roger Well the first thing I'd say is that that's exactly the point of European identity, that that silhouette isn't there. And I think if we were to create a silhouette on the model of French or German or English identity and call that European identity we would be going very fast down the wrong road. And so I think people, European identity, it's the case of beginning to be close, we don't want to write a set of cultural values under the European identity, the point about European identity is it's something completely different, it's a framework, it's a way in which we actually, something neutral. There is no silhouette. European identity is the framework in which we live our lives, that allows us to be whoever we want to be. That's the thing to celebrate about it. You can be Jewish or Muslim or Christian or a humanist or of no religion, you can be gay or straight or trans or whatever, it allows you to be who you want to be, we need to have the European identity that liberates our potential as individuals in the European space and protects our rights. And as far as the question of how d'you get other people to start to understand that. Well my answer to that question would be, it's really only through dialogue and interaction. Now it's not everybody who can travel or who have the opportunity to go to another member state I know but I think that the work that we do in communities around the UK where, with bringing communities together, bringing people from different backgrounds together, so that they can share those stories, so they can make sure that their voice is heard. I often tell the story of a young man who spoke to me at an event and said oh what d'you do and I said, I introduced myself as I did on this podcast and I said I run an organisation called New Europeans and so he said to me well tell me about Europe, I said you really don't want me to do that you know, I'll make a speech and your eyes will glaze over. I said why don't you tell me what you do, so he said well I work for a small company just outside London that is an outfitter, interior design company that we fit luxury yachts, so I said oh well that's interesting, how many of you work in that office, he said well about twenty of us, I said how many of those people are from other EU member states, he said oh yeah we've got about three Greek people and two are from Italy and there's a person from France, I said okay and I said what are you doing next week, he said well next we've got to go to Trieste because we won a commission from a French company to fit a Greek yacht and I said stop stop I said, so a few minutes ago you asked me to tell you about Europe. But actually you're telling me about Europe. And he said well is that it? I said well pretty much actually, that's a big part of it that you just told us about but actually underneath all that, so it's a whole lot of stuff that allows you to do what you do and your company to do what it does. And all of these things that seem to you to be absolutely and are absolutely banal everyday experiences, part of your job, that's

actually what Europe is about and when we understand that we need to look for that sense of European identity in the everyday experience of ordinary people, and that's where it's to be found, I think we'll be a step closer to really understanding the value of European identity, European citizenship, and what we have in Europe today.

MB I think that what you've described there Roger is a really valuable way of helping people to think differently about where European identity might be found and the fact that it's actually in the practice of the everyday is a really evocative way of thinking about it. What I really liked about what Roger has to say about being European is his reflections on what that right of freedom of movement actually meant. He highlighted so clearly that freedom of movement is a misnomer, it's not something that's open to everybody, and nor is it really about movement, and that's something we've been reflecting on a lot as a project team. Essentially freedom of movement is a set of rights relating to settlement in a country other than the one in which you hold nationality. The other thing that really stood out to me is his idea of Europe as being made in the everyday, and in showing how ordinary people have stories about Europe and what it means and what Europe has done for them, even if they don't necessarily recognise for themselves that this is what Europe is. But I wanted to come back to the question of how European identities function, and how they relate to national identities. In his mind he imagines a future where European identities are not contingent on national identities. He sees this as a possibility of allowing and permitting a more inclusive Europe than the one that we have at present. Accounts such as those provided by Sophie and Roger only give a partial insight into what Europeanness means to people. Across the project we've also heard from people for whom the idea of a European identity does not hold the same significance. This became really really clear to me in conversation with Hannah. Hannah is a dual Irish British national who I met for lunch in Dublin last October, and despite feeling very passionately about Britain's membership of the European Union that hadn't translated for her into a sense that she was something that she could call European. Take a listen and just ignore the background noise.

Hannah I don't feel European.

MB You don't see that as an identity.

Hannah No, no I don't. And I'm English and Irish, I'm not European. I only feel European when I'm outside Europe.

MB Not in your daily life.

Hannah I don't identify as being European at all. I've just come back from Paris, I've had a week in France, I don't go round going oh I'm in, you know, I feel like I'm in another place completely.

MB So for you Europe is, so for you Europe is not a place that you identify with. It's a political project is that right?

Hannah Yes, project for corporations. And it's called economic cooperation.

MB Not a project of identification.

Hannah No.

MB Hannah's account of her relationship with Europeanness is by means unique in the project. And indeed I think it would be surprising if it was. We know from previous academic research about European identity making and belonging, that British citizens including those living in the EU express relatively low levels of attachment to Europe, when compared with other nationalities. With this in mind it really is unsurprising that this is similarly made visible through our research.

Before bringing this episode to a close I wanted to bring the conversation back round to Brexit and citizens' rights. In the last week the Coster amendment has passed through UK parliament and this is the amendment that in its own words calls on the government to seek at the earliest opportunity a joint UK EU commitment to adopt part 2 of the withdrawal agreement on citizens' rights and ensure its implementation prior to the UK's exiting the EU, whatever the outcome of the negotiations on other aspects of the withdrawal agreement. This is very explicitly a call to ring-fence those rights as currently written into the draft withdrawal agreement. And while the idea of ring-fencing isn't new, there are questions about how it might be implemented. I'm going to return to Roger now to talk to you a little about the new Europeans and their idea for how this ring-fencing could be implemented through the use of a European green card.

Roger Okay so the idea of the green card is that you ring-fence the status and the rights of Britons in Europe and the EU 27 citizens in the UK, so regardless of whether there's a Brexit deal or not, if there's no deal EU citizens in the UK will get their right to stay and many other rights as well, and Britons in the EU will have to fight it out member state by member state to see what they have. What we're saying is that over and above that there needs to be something that is for EU 27 citizens in the UK a proof of status and in particular for Britons in the EU something that would give them their free movement rights back within Europe, because as we were saying earlier on, unfortunately you can't create a new kind of citizenship for Britons in the EU because we're still in a situation where citizenship of the European Union is linked to being a passport holder of an EU member state so British citizens in the EU will cease to be EU citizens. But EU citizens in the UK will not cease to be EU citizens but they will cease to enjoy the privileges and the status that they previously enjoyed by virtue of the fact that they were an EU citizen living in another EU member state. And so what we're saying is you have to create an equivalent status for the status of an EU citizen who is residing in another EU member state and that's what the green card does. And your eligibility for a green card will depend on whether you have settled status in the UK, which is a matter for the Home Office, or whether you have the equivalent status permanent residency as a British citizen in the EU. Once you have that status and you have a residency card of an EU member state which has different status in the UK, we say you should be able to apply to the European Commission and be issued with a green card that will ring-fence your status and rights, as a Briton you have free movement, in the UK you'll have physical proof of your status. There needs to be a physical card, there needs to be something that people can have that would demonstrate that they have the same status and rights as if they were still had the status of an EU citizen living in another EU member state even though we know that things have changed because of Brexit. But the key issue would be persuading the EU to actually do it. We've already had one hearing in front of the civil liberties and the petitions and the employment social affairs committee in February last year, and there's another hearing coming up next month in March in front of the constitution affairs committee so what we would want would be for the European parliament to

pass a resolution asking the commission to draw up a legislative proposal for the introduction of a green card for Europe or an EU green card post Brexit.

MB Thank you very much Roger that's been really fascinating, from so many points of view. I think outlining the very different multiple reasons for living in Europe, going through what European identity could be and is to you and the prospects for the future for British citizens living in the EU and EU citizens living in the UK, so thank you very much.

Roger Thank you.

MB Listening to Roger's ideas about the European green card reminded me of the next steps report that the project team co-authored with migration policy institute last spring, and in particular our key take-home message which was concerned with how EU member states had not yet started to make plans for how they would implement the terms of the withdrawal agreement. I return to this here because I think that until now we focused very much on questions of what the withdrawal agreement includes, questions of what Brexit means for identity, citizenship and belonging, when actually the reality is that at present nothing has yet changed. But of course from March 29th or whenever Britain withdraws from the European Union people's rights and entitlements will change, and at that point I think that we will start to see more of what Brexit means for British citizens living in the EU than we have until now, and I think that we need to pay attention to what that might be, to who might fall through the gaps as the mantle of freedom of movement is removed.

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.