

“Brexit from the Campus”:
Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England*

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Abstract

The title of my article bears a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to a group of Conservative politicians around Boris Johnson who studied at Oxford University in the eighties and who are identified in Jonathan Coe’s novel as the engineers behind the Brexit; on the other hand, Coe’s novel portrays a fictional group of scholars who are more or less frustrated and dissatisfied with the university for various reasons and turn their backs on academia to find their luck elsewhere. In the first case, Oxford colleges such as Balliol where people are nostalgically hankering after England’s glorious past and dream of regaining England’s former glory, play a role as seedbed of Brexit; in the second case, we are dealing with a more private ‘exit’ of a group of talented academicians who no longer believe in the university as a place of self-realization. While nostalgia is a driving force of the first group, the second has a clear-eyed view of the growing hostility of their environment. Historically speaking, the existence of nostalgia here and the lack of nostalgia there are two sides of the same medal: they point to the heritage of the Thatcher era and the deep-reaching ‘reformation’ of British society whose effects can still be felt today. They also point to loss: the loss of social consensus in the first case, and the loss of what the university and a university career once stood for.

Keywords: campus/university novel; state of the nation novel; Thatcherism; Brexit; nostalgia.

Introduction

Admittedly, Jonathan Coe's celebrated novel *Middle England* cannot be categorized as campus fiction in the narrow sense of the word. Rather, it is one of the first English Brexit novels, a family saga, a marriage novel, or an artist novel. Last but not least it is a socio-political 'state of the nation' novel that tries to picture the social and political upheavals in Great Britain in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The rifts that go through the macrocosm of society are mirrored by the many smaller rifts that split up the microcosm of the family and of personal relationships.

The image of the campus in this novel, then, is part of a more comprehensive picture of the state of the nation. Nostalgia plays a role only as far as the campus of Oxford University is concerned, but not in the sense one would expect, while the other campuses that turn up in the novel – and the staff and students that belong to them – are portrayed in a cold, and disillusioning light.

'Brexit from the Campus' in the first sense refers to a group of high-ranking Conservative politicians whom Coe in his novel has identified as the driving forces behind England's leaving of the European Union. They belong to the upper-class clientele of Public Schools such as Eton and colleges such as Balliol, Oxford, with their ideologies, nostalgic Empire dreams, student discussion groups and debating chambers in the eighties of the last century. The elderly writer Benjamin Trotter, the main focalizer of Coe's novel, went to Balliol College in Oxford, together with Boris Johnson. Not that he knew Johnson intimately, but he lived on the same corridor with him and shared bathroom and toilet for three weeks. This is the reason why Benjamin is challenged by his former schoolmate and friend, journalist Doug Anderton, to write an Oxford campus novel in fulfillment of his commission to produce another novel for his new London publisher after his

successful debut novel, *A Rose Without a Thorn*, which was published by his friend Philip. Benjamin declines Doug's challenge, but what the reader realizes is that the kind of novel suggested by Doug has become part of Coe's *Middle England* novel.

In a second sense, Coe's *Middle England* strongly 'smacks' of 'academia' or 'intelligentsia' wherever one looks as a reader, for its main characters are 'bookish people,' writers, journalists, publishers, lecturers, or librarians. Various campuses (Oxford, London, Birmingham, and Marseilles) are part of its setting, and one of the main characters whom we follow throughout the story is the young university lecturer and art historian, Dr. Sophie Potter, Coe's second important focalizer, who struggles to build a career in this often hostile environment. In the context of the university novel, Coe's Sophie Potter appears to be a contemporary version of David Lodge's Robyn Penrose, the protagonist of *Nice Work* (1988). While Lodge's novel comically thematizes the abyss that separates the 'two nations' of academia and industry, *Middle England* is about the 'two nations' into which England is split in the course of the Brexit. With regard to the university, the novel turns a cold shoulder to academia and points towards the importance of life beyond the campus in a more comprehensive, class-conscious way. Coe in his novel does not idealize his men and women of letters but portrays them as sober-minded pragmatic people who 'get on' with their lives. Many academics show themselves to be disillusioned with the world they have been living and working in. They begin to realize that their idealism can be destroyed by a toxic or hostile environment, and that there is a life beyond the campus that is more promising, more satisfying than their often frustrating and badly paid academic pursuits, so that they begin to plan their own, private 'exit' from the campus.

This is the second meaning of my title 'Brexit from the Campus,' and while the first is closely related to a special form of political nostalgia, the second seems to breathe the opposite spirit, referring to clear-eyed people who, although feeling nostalgic at times, have their feet on the ground in their private lives, being

future-oriented.¹ Coe's double-edged response to nostalgia is embedded in a complex narratological discussion which thematizes in postmodern fashion the search of its author for an adequate subject. *A Rose Without a Thorn*, the 'pearl' found at the core of Ben's opus magnum *Unrest*, is talked about, details are mentioned and compared to Benjamin's life, its hovering between memoir and fiction is discussed, but the narrative never leaves the pages of *Middle England*. The same is true with regard to *Clash of the Clowns*, Charlie's bitter life story which exists fragmentarily in the form of newspaper clippings, diary entries, and Charlie's oral explanations, but not outside the novel. Last but not least, Doug's suggestion of a Brexit novel about Boris Johnson and his ilk at Oxford University in the eighties remains unwritten, or to be more precise, ends up as part of a novel or structure that is much more comprehensive, which tries to combine the public with the private, the past with present, cause with effect, so that the reader is confronted with a panorama-like view of what it feels like to live in England in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Since the implied metafictional discussion of what kind of book Benjamin should write is central to our understanding of *Middle England*, I should at first like to have a look at the different alternatives that are discussed throughout the novel in order to throw light on Coe's intentions as a writer. I will then turn to institutions such as Balliol and their role with regard to Brexit. Finally, I will discuss Sophie Potter's break with academia and the reasons behind it.

Benjamin Trotter's Unpublished Novel *Unrest*: A Sprawling 'Gesamtkunstwerk' Pruned

Sophie's uncle, Benjamin, is Coe's main focalizer, and, like Coe, he is a writer of novels. As a novelist, Benjamin has a late and difficult start. As we find out, at the age of fifty-two, he has not achieved much in terms of publishing, and in the last two and a half years in which he has been living in an old mill on the River Severn close to Shrewsbury,

he had not even thought much about his novel. Or his novel sequence, his *roman fleuve*, whatever the damn thing was supposed to be called. *Unrest*, the project on which he'd been working ever since he was a student at Oxford University in the late 1970s, now extended to some one and a half million words, or somewhat longer than the complete works of Jane Austen and E.M. Forster put together. (107)

With regard to getting published, it is not very helpful that his ambitious *opus magnum* comes with a "musical soundtrack composed by Benjamin himself" (107). Together with literature, music is Benjamin's second favorite discipline. The literary and musical pages he has produced so far form a kind of "unreadable" and "unlistenable" *Gesamtkunstwerk* that has no chance to be published in this form, so that "the whole thing had started to lower over Benjamin like an oppressive cloud" (107).

The French concept of *roman fleuve* points towards the subgenre of family saga which was already mentioned before. The literal translation is 'river novel.' It goes back to the works of Romain Rolland in the thirties of the last century and portrays the lives of closely related people in the 'stream of time,' that is, over more than one generation. It is also often applied to Proust's series of novels. With regard to Coe, *Middle England* is part of Coe's own *roman fleuve* which begins with *The Rotter's Club* (2001) and continues with *The Closed Circle* (2004). The title that Benjamin has given to his *opus magnum*, *Unrest*, symbolically refers to the stimulus at the bottom of his writing, his traumatic relationship with Cicely, which turns out to be responsible for so much in his life. When we meet Benjamin after the burial of his mother, Sheila, for the first time in this novel, he has got 'stuck' as a writer.

It is his friends from "King William's School" (108), a prestigious Birmingham private school, who help him in this situation and bring him back on the right track. Colin and Sheila, his lower-middle-class parents, sent him to this school, and Benjamin shows awareness of the class-ridden character of the English school system when he admits in his interview with Hermione that "it did make me realize how the British education

system can, you know . . . divide people” (215). I will come back to the class-ridden character of the English educational system later in my essay.

Since the *opus magnum* has grown too big for one reader, it is divided into parts, each part is read by one of Benjamin’s friends from King William’s School, and when they come together again in the Victoria, an old Birmingham pub, under the guidance of Philip who is not only a garden center manager but also a publisher of sorts, they agree to the (initial) chagrin of Benjamin that there is just one publishable part amongst the many pages he has written, namely the 200 pages concerning his great romance with Cicely. The title Steve suggests – *A Rose Without a Thorn* (113) – seems acceptable to all. If Benjamin can’t find a publisher, Philip offers to publish it himself, although ironically most of his publications are about horticulture and do not deal with *belles lettres*. However, the title *A Rose Without a Thorn* fits in well with the other titles on his publishing list.

A Rose Without a Thorn is one of three ‘phantom novels’ that play a role in Coe’s *Middle England*. It is about Benjamin’s love for Cicely and Cicely’s subsequent betrayal, “the only story he’d ever wanted to tell” (351), which turns out to be the traumatic pivotal point of Benjamin’s lifeline. The second phantom novel is Charley Chappell’s *Clash of the Clowns*, and the third one the Oxford College novel suggested by Doug.

Since Benjamin does not find another publisher, he decides to let Philip publish his novel – successfully, as it turns out, for Benjamin ends up longlisted for the Booker Prize, his novel is translated into French, and he commits himself to writing another novel within the next six months, although he has no idea what he will write about. The only thing he knows is that it shouldn’t be so personal and intimate again and should somehow involve the state England has got itself into.

Metafictional Self-Reflection

A Rose Without a Thorn and *Clash of the Clowns* are entirely imaginary within the context of Coe’s novel. Both of them are

rather intimate and private life stories concerning the fate of individuals. Benjamin is aware of this, and feels provoked by his friend, Doug Anderton, another former class-mate from King William's School, and meanwhile a well-known political journalist. Doug has been poking fun at him for his unpolitical ways, and so, as Benjamin remembers, in one of their conversations suggested he write something

broader, something about the state this country has got itself into in the last few years, and Doug thought about this for a while and said, Fine, why don't you write about the time you met Boris Johnson at Oxford, and at first I thought he was taking the piss again, because this has become a bit of a joke lately, the fact that I shared a corridor with Boris Johnson at Balliol college for about three weeks in the autumn of 1983, and we used to pass each other in the corridor on the way to the toilet and back. . . . (338)

The excerpt printed above is from the only section in the novel that is written with the help of the stream of consciousness technique. In this passage, Benjamin remembers what Doug says about Oxford, and although Doug's raving does not amount to political analysis, it leaves no doubt what his political standpoint is like. Doug points out that politicians such as David Cameron, Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, Jeremy Hunt or George Osborne who engineered the Brexit were all, one way or another, related to Oxford in the eighties or slightly later, that

these cunts (Doug's words, not mine) all knew each other, and now these self-satisfied, entitled twats (Doug's phrase, not mine) were running the country, and they were still jostling for power and having their sad little arguments, but instead of doing it at the Oxford Union they were doing it on the national stage and we were all having our lives shaped and redirected by these people and their stupid infighting whether we'd have voted for them or not, and how was that as the subject for a novel... (338)

Obviously, Doug's political standpoint is left wing or Labour. What he voices here, reported through Ben's stream of consciousness, is his own private belief, and we have to be careful not to confuse it with Benjamin's, which is less radical or extreme, or with Coe's. But Doug does not stand alone with this view, and there are a number of (mostly left-wing) critics who share it in the present. Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson, for example, argue

that part of the reason the Brexit vote happened was that a small number of people in Britain have a dangerous, imperialist misconception of our standing in the world, and that this above all else was the catalyst for the process leading up to Brexit, especially for those arguing most fervently for Brexit. (2-3)

As a writer, Coe has a complex and problem-oriented view of reality and is willing to look at it from more than just one side, although there can be no doubt that his *alter ego* and *persona*, Benjamin, after some doubts, is finally convinced that he should vote 'remain' (301-302).

When Benjamin has to see his sister a bit later, and has to revisit, on this occasion, the town of Oxford – which he avoided doing in the past – he has some kind of *déjà-vu* which makes him realize that “the college buildings . . . are so beautiful, so old, so full of history, that's what creates the strange and complicated flavor of this place, and so yes, this is the perfect city to come and surrender to your memories, to let the present be invaded by the past. . . ” (389).

But Benjamin will not surrender to the nostalgic memories evoked by the sight of these colleges, “an old man standing in an Oxford quad looking back on his student days and asking *où sont les neiges d'antan?*” (340). Nevertheless, the memories created by the sight of these old buildings make him feel the “stirrings of creativity” (339). But he will not, so he reasons with himself, take this creativity in the direction suggested by Doug. Instead, he claims that he will take a “stab” (340) at Charlie Chappell and his story – which he does, to a certain extent. Charlie's story is

embedded into *Middle England* in one way or the other, as is the personal and intimate *A Rose Without a Thorn*.

Read through the lens of trauma theory (see Whitehead 2004; Mengel and Borzaga 2012, “Introduction”; Mengel 2020, especially 148-150), Charlie Chappell’s life story is a replacement or substitute of what Benjamin cannot or does not want to write about: his Oxford years and his abandoned studies, and what exactly happened between him and Cicely. Since traumatized people more often than not are unable to speak about their trauma directly, but nevertheless feel the urge to talk about it, conscious or unconscious repression finds its outlet in narrative replacement or substitution. Although the reader gets some information about Ben’s unlucky relationship with Cicely throughout the novel, in *Middle England* Benjamin never lets us look into his soul or gives away what was at its bottom during the Oxford years (1979-1983) which was his most formative time but which he keeps silent about.

Nostalgia – an Oxfordian Disease?

Oxford, however, remains a serious concern of Coe’s *Middle England*, and what Coe says about Oxford, its clientele of students, and its atmosphere is at the heart of his novel. The political event of the Brexit, so it seems, has been spawned by the spirit dominating in universities such as Oxford in the eighties, and while Benjamin, his sister Lois and Sophie are not hankering after the past, and get on with their lives, although they sometimes cling to their memories, the nostalgia about what England lost in the past seems to be responsible for what happens in the present. Coe is not the only one who is of this opinion, but he shares this with a number of other non-literary critics. Dorling and Tomlinson for example, argue “that the British education system has helped produce a homogenised and corrupt elite who are often descended from the architects of Empire, and who too often make claims for British exceptionalism” (9).

Middle England shows how people are affected by the populist politics of a power-hungry clique of conservative

politicians who recklessly pursue their shortsighted political goals to stay in power, or, to put it differently, use the nostalgia for England's glorious past as one of their political tools to make the people vote 'leave' (on nostalgia and political ideology cf. also Kenny).

David Cameron in the novel belongs among those politicians who play with the idea of Brexit although they do not intend to leave the European Union. For Cameron, Coe makes it clear, the promise to let the people decide about it is just a trick or gamble to stay in power, placate the growing number of Eurosceptics in his own Conservative Party and thus fortify his own position of leadership. In the novel, Cameron's politics are represented by his right-hand Nigel whom the political journalist Doug meets on a regular basis in order to sound him out on what is going on in 10 Downing Street (264-270). Nigel points out that Cameron does not believe in England's leaving the European Union and that he knows that "leaving it would be bad for the economy" (267). Without any need he has promised the referendum and also fixed the date, 23 June 2016, naively believing that the majority of the people will vote against 'leave.' What becomes clear in the conversation between Nigel and Doug is also that a number of rivals such as Michael Gove or Boris Johnson have waited for this moment to start their own power games.

Quite in contrast to David Cameron, who can trace back his origin to King William IV and who went to Eton and later, in the eighties, to Brasenose College, Oxford, Benjamin, who comes from a working class/lower middle-class family, does not belong to the privileged aristocratic clientele of Oxford University that, together with its rival Cambridge, has produced generation after generation of political leaders, intellectuals, and Empire builders. Benjamin belongs to the lucky few who, nevertheless, found their way into these ancient institutions but were outsiders there from the start. About his undergraduate years, Benjamin is completely silent. What we know for sure is that Benjamin left Oxford in autumn 1983, at the beginning of his second year of DPhil.

Benjamin's reluctance to write an Oxford college novel has to do with his private trauma. He refuses to succumb to feelings of nostalgia, however, because he believes that they are too private, and that "I need not look quite so close to home" (340). We get an explanation for this somewhat cryptic formulation when we remember his interview with Hermione Dawes after his novel was longlisted for the Booker Prize. In this interview, Benjamin insists that his book is "on the cusp of fiction and memoir" (217). At the beginning of his novel, his decision to quit Oxford and drop his studies for DPhil at the beginning of his second year is triggered by a flashback when he listens to a favorite piece by a British jazz musician, which obviously brings back vivid memories of Cicely. Benjamin explains to Hermione that he left Oxford University in 1983 convinced that, after his separation from Cicely, all his other aspirations would come to nothing. When he stands in a quad surrounded by Oxford college buildings, claiming that writing about his time at Oxford would be "too close to home," he admits his fear of re-traumatization. His decision to quit his studies at Oxford is closely related to his personal nightmare for which 'Cicely' is responsible. Writing a straightforward Oxford campus novel, therefore, as suggested by Doug, proves impossible for him. What we get, however, is a short personal glimpse of Balliol and a longer interpretation of what it stands for in the context of Brexit as part of Coe's 'state of the nation' theme.

Sophie Potter: An Academic Career Aborted

The second important focalizer of *Middle England* is Benjamin Trotter's niece, Sophie Potter. It seems to me that Coe split up his biographical self for his fiction and projected some aspects of his younger self on the academic Sophie and some of its older self on the writer Benjamin. Coe went to Trinity College, Cambridge – in contrast to his alter ego Benjamin, who ends up at Balliol, and while Coe finished his BA at Trinity and proceeded to take an MA and a PhD at Warwick University, where he became a tutor in English poetry, Benjamin aborts his PhD at Balliol after one and a

half years to become an accountant in London. In this way, Coe, the writer, splits himself up into two related personae and ascribes parts of his past academic experiences to the fictional character of Sophie Potter who, like Coe, gets a PhD degree but unlike him enters upon a university career as lecturer, something which Coe also might have had in mind before he decided to become a writer.

Middle England comes closest to being a campus novel in those parts in which Coe follows the life of Sophie Potter, an art historian and university lecturer who tries to build an academic career at different British universities. Sophie got her MA from Bristol and a PhD from the Courtauld Institute (London University). When she, at the age of 27, is offered a “two-year teaching fellowship” at the University of Birmingham, she considers it “a stroke of good fortune” (23). Moving back to the town where she was born and finding a temporary shelter in the house of her father are small discomforts she is willing to put up with. The same applies to the fact that she has to leave most of her friends behind, and say goodbye to the city she used to live in.

Sophie keeps visiting her friend Sohan, a lecturer in the English department at London University. Via Sophie and Sohan, the reader is introduced into the world of academics, and from the start Coe seems to have certain doubts about it. When Sophie is invited by Sohan to watch him chair a public discussion under the title “Fictionalizing Life; Living in Fiction” with two novelists, the well-known Englishman Lionel Hampshire and the lesser-known French writer Philippe Aldebert, she immediately asks him: “What does it mean?” (27) She is disappointed by his answer: “How should I know? You’ve got two writers here who have nothing in common except their colossal opinions about themselves. I had to call it something” (27). Coe’s satire draws our attention to the fact that academia more often than not relies on high-blown or vague phrases that are meant to hide more than they reveal, and to throw sand into people’s eyes. Nevertheless, the audience amounts to almost 200. It is significant in this context that amongst them are only a few students, as Sophie can tell. “From her position in one of

the top rows, she found herself looking out towards the stage across a sea of white hair and bald patches” (27).

The following discussion turns out to be disappointing. Long and rambling questions are followed by answers in the form of little speeches, a phenomenon well-known among academics. There are some people who are not content with just asking a question but believe that they are so important that they must take the stage, and the interviewees give long and meandering replies because they are either too close to their subject, or because they are afraid that they cannot answer the next badly-phrased question so that they rather prefer to prevaricate. Coe knows about the shortcomings of these events very well, knowing the world of academia from the inside. When Sohan runs out of questions too soon and desperately sends Sophie an *sms* message asking for support, the whole situation acquires a farce-like character. Sophie does her best to provide more food for discussion, and as a matter of fact, at some point a moment worthwhile our attention occurs when Lionel Hampshire talks about moderation and the English national character:

‘Extremes of left and right don’t appeal to us. And we are also essentially tolerant. That’s why the multi-cultural experiment in Britain has by and large been successful, with one or two minor blips. I wouldn’t presume to compare us to the French, in this regard, of course, but certainly, speaking personally, these are the things I most admire about the British: our moderation, and our tolerance.’

‘What a load of self-satisfied bullshit,’ said Sohan. But, regrettably, he did not say it on stage. (30)

Lionel Hampshire here is airing the idea of ‘Middle England,’ which, after all, gives the novel its title. As Sophie later remarks, the co-existence of many cultures in one place seems to work – at least in the Birmingham area. Sohan, however, is of a different opinion. As a foreigner in this country, he has developed a greater sensitivity with regard to xenophobia. This discussion brings us back to the topic of Brexit where migration is a great issue, of course, and intolerance one of the reasons why people

voted 'leave.' Looked at, more closely, this is related to the nostalgia for England's colonial past, only that the far-flung peoples who were safely put away in far-flung colonies in the past are now crowding on England's doorsteps. Although Coe's choice of title for this novel, *Middle England*, seems to emphasize the tendency for moderation and tolerance to spread amongst great parts of the English population, we are nevertheless confronted with the historical fact that England's leaving of the European Union was partly decided by 'Middle England,' that is not the poorest districts but those with a lower middle-class and middle-class population:

. . . the greatest support for Remain was in the poshest areas of England (decile ten), but then the greatest support for Leave was in deciles four to seven, literally 'Middle England', within which only forty-two constituencies out of 212 saw a majority voting Remain. . . It was Middle England that voted out most, not the poorest. (Dorling and Tomlinson 299)

In Birmingham (that is in one of those 'Middle England' areas) Sophie gets to know Ian, who is a teacher at a driving school that she has to attend for a speed awareness course because she was caught speeding at 37 miles an hour in a 30mph zone. After several disappointments with men from academia, Sophie feels attracted to Ian because he has got everything she now wishes for: he is good-looking, well-tempered, and, what is most important to her, he is not an intellectual like her friends before. She does not know at this point that later he will vote 'Leave,' together with his mother, which will become a major obstacle in the development of their relationship.

At the university, she is successful in her job, her students seem to like her, and she keeps working towards the publication of her PhD thesis, her first 'book,' a stepping stone in one's academic career. She also goes to conferences, which she is expected to do as part of her further academic qualifications.

In July 2012 she attends the "Quatorzième Colloque Annuel Alexandre Dumas" (116) at the University of Aix-Marseille with a

paper on contemporary portraits of Dumas, parts of a chapter from her thesis. In the course of this conference, she meets the Afro-American musicologist Adam who works in the field of film music. They listen to each other's presentation, full of mutual praise about what they have heard, spend a wonderful evening together on the beach, go skinny-dipping together, and later say goodbye to each other with a passionate kiss. Next day, Adam disappears. As she is told, Adam has taken an earlier flight back to America. Parts of these episodes, the small talk, the conference atmosphere, and the love story, remind one of David Lodge's *Small World* and its characters, Angelica Pabst and Persse McGarrigle. This applies especially to the sudden disappearance of Adam, which is reminiscent of Angelica's constant flights in Lodge's novel. In *Middle England*, the reader later finds out that Adam has a girlfriend in America, so that his abrupt disappearance signals his fear of getting involved more deeply with Sophie. Coe knows university life intimately, and also what conference hopping means. This is no small wonder, for he himself went part of the way that his character Sophie is going.

Back in Birmingham, Sophie feels pangs of conscience about her relationship to Adam. After all, she has been married to Ian only for two months, and their marriage has been going fine so far. Nevertheless, she keeps trying to get in touch with Adam by e-mail, but he never replies. Her academic career "is progressing nicely. One small step at a time" (145). Her thesis is finally published, and there is another job offer: "a permanent lectureship at one of the principal London universities" (146), and while Sophie is very much looking forward to it, also because the new job means more money, Ian does not like the idea that they have to live separate lives for at least three days a week.

A nice change in her life is the cruise she can go on, offered by a company which wants her expertise for the diversion of the tourists on board for whom she is to give a lecture on modern painting. More important than meeting the author Lionel Hampshire again on board of the ship, who was hired for similar reasons, is her encounter with Mr. Wilcox, the owner of a company

manufacturing forklift trucks, who by chance is her neighbor at the dinner table and who has hardly any appreciation for the life of the mind. The name Mr. Wilcox might make one think of the moneyed Wilcox family contrasted with the cultivated Schlegels in Forster's novel *Howards End* (1910). More obviously, Mr. Wilcox is another tribute to David Lodge and the third novel of his campus trilogy, *Nice Work*, in which a character with the name of Vic Wilcox becomes the partner of the protagonist Robyn Penrose, a struggling lecturer, like Sophie, at the University of Rummidge (Lodge's fictional name for the University of Birmingham). The pairing of Robyn and Vic is part of a governmental 'shadowing scheme' which has the purpose of improving the mutual understanding of academia and industry. In contrast to Lodge, Coe has no intention of this kind. For him, they are two different worlds, and will remain so, as the following passage illustrates:

'What, and that makes your life more "real" than mine, somehow?'
 'People need forklift trucks.'
 'I'm not sure I do.'
 'Of course you do. You just don't think about it.'
 'Well, maybe you need paintings just as much. Only *you* don't think about *that*.'
 Mrs. Wilcox laughed at the comeback and clinked her glass with Sophie's.
 'There you are, Geoffrey – *touché*.' (155)

Lodge's *Nice Work* came out in 1988, the year of Thatcher's final Education Bill. What Sophie shares with Robyn is the precariousness of her job situation at the time of budget cuts, for which the Thatcher era was famous, and the increasing rivalry on the job market (see Edwards).

While the cruise and her lecture on board of the "Legend of Topaz IV" form a highlight of Sophie's university life in so far as she is able to reap some unexpected fruit of her academic efforts in a more practical way, her Waterloo comes in the form of the transgender woman Emma Shamma who takes Sophie's remark "You have a lot of difficulty making up your mind about this, don't

you?” (247) personally. Although Emma’s general indecisiveness to voice her opinion with regard to Edvard Munch’s different paintings of ‘The Cry’ and her inability to decide on a date for an interview, are the immediate reasons for Sophie’s unfortunate remark, Emma, confirmed by her friend Coriander Anderton, believes that Sophie has been referring to her gender dysphoria.

Sophie is suspended from her teaching job for the sake of political correctness till further notice – which takes more than half a year. Although she is vindicated and reinstalled in her job after a long time, her doubts if a university career is the right choice of profession for her keep growing. Besides the lack of support by her colleagues during this difficult time and the experience of being mobbed by her students on the social media during her suspension, the inconvenience of living apart from her husband several days a week, and her low salary make her reflect about her decision. She is confirmed in her doubts by her Anglo-American acquaintance Adam who has surprisingly taken up correspondence again and who tells her that he has quitted his adjunct professorship at the university and taken up a job as composer for video games. He justifies his decision in the following way:

There are always a ton of different reasons – frustrations with the job, hating the internal politics, I guess you know them all – but it all comes down to money in the end. Couldn’t carry on as adjunct faculty with no prospect of tenure, making <\$20,000 a year. Luckily something else came up. (240)

Sophie, too, who got pregnant in the meantime, decides to give up the idea of a university career, and like her friend Sohan will start to work for Sohan’s husband, Michael, who invests his quickly earned ‘big money’ in the founding of a charity college in Hartlepool, for which Sophie is to become Director of Studies. What this means for her exactly does not become clear, for Coe leaves things here deliberately vague. But Sophie’s reasons for leaving university sound very similar to Adam’s. If there is something nostalgic involved in her decision, we encounter it here:

The job's not what it was, or at least not what I once thought it was going to be. Everything has become transactional. Students (or their parents) pay vast sums up front and expect value for money in return. Younger lecturers work themselves to the bone while the older generation sit around waiting for their retirement packages to kick in and meanwhile will do anything to preserve a quiet life: my head of department being a prime example. (371)

Sophie evaluates the 'state of the university' in this excerpt. Basically, she describes what university life has come to after the great 'reforms' initiated in the age of Margaret Thatcher, especially in the aftermath of the 1988 Reform Bill, whose repercussions can still be felt in the present. Marketization, commercial competition, the cutting down on state funding, private financing of the universities, and high study fees have left deep traces in the university landscape and strengthened the class-bound character of the English education system. Dorling and Tomlinson go even further when they relate the English vote for 'Leave' to education:

The majority of people who voted Leave were taught what they know of British history in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. We argue that the British education system has helped produce a homogenised and corrupt elite who are often descended from the architects of empire, and who too often make claims for British exceptionalism. (9)

This system also has repercussions with regard to the relations between students and teachers. Parents who have to pay thousands of pounds each year (to be exact, £9000 in 2012, according to Dorling and Tomlinson 129) for tuition fees have 'great expectations' with regard to the study success of their offspring. University lecturers lose their independence of judgement and have to justify themselves if they fail a student. The abolition of tenure leads to enhanced rivalry amongst colleagues and weakens their social positions. All in all, the atmosphere in the university between the different groups has grown more competitive, more hostile. The holy cow of academic freedom has

been sacrificed in the abattoir of commercial success, and idealism has gone down the drain. As a place to study or to work in, the university has become less attractive. For some authors, this might be the reason for nostalgia, and they might be tempted to conjure up the good old times when universities were still unshackled from the laws of monetarism and the free market. This is not so for Jonathan Coe who, although he had an excellent academic education at Trinity College, seems to have sensed in similar fashion that an academic career was nothing for him, and that he should try his hand at something else – at writing, for example. *Middle England* is a fruit of this combined experience.

Conclusion

It turns out that, historically speaking, the ‘double Brexit’ that I have been describing, England’s voting for ‘Leave’ and the private exodus of scholars from the university in *Middle England*, seem to have the same historical causes and roots, and that both have to be explained ‘historically.’ Coe’s *Middle England* shows the state of the nation in the years of the Conservative governments under Cameron and his coalitions up to the Brexit vote (2010-2016), and shortly afterwards under Theresa May and Boris Johnson, but it reaches further back into the past, to the bank crisis of 2008, or even to the Thatcher era which seems to have had repercussions on contemporary politics. When Benjamin looks back in the novel, he often has the feeling that the year 1979 when Thatcher became Prime Minister plays a pivotal role in British politics (Coe 416). During the time of her government, the roots were grown for the kind of deeply divided English society we have today, and the foundations were laid for the contemporary education system. Especially in her later years, Thatcher was bent on criticizing the European Union for its bureaucracy and kept pointing out, against all evidence, the disadvantages that England had to put up with as a member of the European Union. Brexit, so it seems, is not only caused by nostalgia for a glorious past, along with xenophobia and impatience with Brussels’s red tape and xenophobia but something

that “went deeper” (Grey 3). An upper-class political elite out of touch with the people, a highly unequal and unjust class society, unaffordable academic education, growing poverty in marginal groups, a lower middle class slowly sliding down the social drain, growing numbers of low skill areas in England – all this forms the seedbed in which the ideas behind Brexit could flower and take fruit. Coe, so it seems, is bent on drawing a comprehensive picture in which the campus and academia form an important ingredient. When his Benjamin refuses to write an Oxford novel, he knows that Oxford and Cambridge, along with the public school system on which privileged education still relies, are just a symptom, and not the reason for the social problems under which England is suffering at present.

Note:

¹ It might be interesting to note that there is a lively discussion on the positive implications of nostalgia as a future-oriented disposition. See for example, Sedikides et al. (2018); Abeyta et al. (2015).

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