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RENÉE VAN ABSWOUDE AND LOTJE DE VRIES

In June 2016, the United Kingdom (UK) held a referendum on the question of withdrawal from the European Union (EU). With a 51.9% majority, the citizens voted in favor of what now is known as "Brexit." While in England the majority voted to leave the EU, Northern Ireland voted to remain. Drawing on three months of ethnographic fieldwork in the border town Derry/Londonderry, this essay examines the impact of Brexit and its potential consequences on the relations between British and Irish citizens. More specifically, we look at the impact of the establishment of an EU outside border—the return of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland—on social boundaries and walls between polarized segments of society in Derry/Londonderry.

Brexit not only threatens to create a new border between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland —which remains part of the European Union. It has also already reaffirmed non-permeable social walls within the city and between its increasingly polarized citizenry. In fact, due to hardening debates, extended deadlines, and general uncertainty, it seems that identities continue to polarize even further. At the same time, our qualitative data show that this polarization needs to be understood at a micro level: the underlying understandings of these identities shows two groups of citizens with different fears and similar expressions. While Brexit certainly sharpened the debate and made tensions rise again, we conclude that precisely Brexit offers opportunities for taking down some of these social boundaries faster than otherwise would be likely. We will first briefly review historical relations between the UK and Northern Ireland, before turning to how different walls and borders impact on identity and how citizens aim to overcome these boundaries.

Brexit has caused a great resurgence of concern amongst ordinary citizens in Derry/Londonderry. They base this unease on the precarious relationship between Irish and British citizens that can be traced back to the sixteenth century, when English forces colonized the island of Ireland. Numerous events over the course of history have resulted in a subordinated status for the original Irish (mostly Catholic) citizens of the country, while the British (mostly Protestant) citizens dominated the economy and politics. During this period, the amount of native Irish citizens declined, which resulted in numerous revolts. The biggest revolt occurred in 1688, when Irish citizens laid an unsuccessful hundred-day siege to the city of Derry/Londonderry.

Things remained relatively peaceful until various Irish paramilitary organizations published their Proclamation of Independence in 1916, calling for all Irish independence from the British mainland. It resulted in a three-year War of Independence and ended with the British government partitioning the island, establishing Northern Ireland. Because the British desired a British state for its British people, the partition did not improve social relations, and the (perceived) inferior status of Irish citizens persisted in Northern Ireland. Hence, Irish inhabitants of Derry/Londonderry continued to revolt against their unwanted status as citizens of a British border city.

Tensions boiled over again at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, when the British government banned numerous civil rights marches all over Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the marches continued as acts of resistance and often ended with violence. So did the one on January 30, 1972 in Derry/Londonderry, when thirteen marchers were killed by the British forces. This event, popularly known as Bloody Sunday, marked the beginning of the Troubles, a thirty-year-long conflict between the British Army and the paramilitary Irish Republican Army (IRA) in which eventually 3.500 people would die and between 30.000 and 47.000 citizens would be injured. At the end of the 1980s, numerous Irish nationalist parties, along with the IRA and the British government entered negotiations on how violence could be ended. This resulted in a ceasefire called by the IRA in 1994 and eventually, in 1998, the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, marking the official end of the conflict.

In practice, however, no such sharp transition from war to peace exists and many physical and social boundaries have persisted. Nonetheless, the Good Friday agreement did bring some tangible improvements on people's lives. For instance, the border separating Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland was opened; a power-

sharing agreement was set up in Stormont, the Northern Ireland parliament; and citizens were given the right to dual citizenship, which meant that people could apply for both an Irish and British passport, which represented equal rights. Over the years, people tried to forget the Troubles and moved on with their lives.

Today, in the face of Brexit, the 30-year period of the Troubles casts new shadows over everyday life. This is especially the case in Derry/ Londonderry because of its immediate proximity to the looming hard border between the EU and the UK. Prior to the referendum, the British Home Secretary Theresa May mentioned that Brexit would have a "negative impact on the North/South border [on the Irish island], bringing cost and disruption to […] people's lives." Recent violent outbursts in the city in 2019 – a car bomb in the city center and the death of investigative journalist Lyra McKee – are considered connected to renewed paramilitary violence, and (international) news agencies are suggesting linkages between an expected relapse into conflict and Brexit, and the looming hard border. But how does Brexit and the looming hard border influence people's everyday lives, social relations and boundaries within the city? And to what extent is the violent past of relevance to the new political reality?

A good starting point is to examine the impact of Brexit on one of the core social concepts that surrounds borders, boundaries and walls: that of identity. The different simplified interpretations of Irish and British identity stands in contrast to local perspectives and understandings of what those identities mean. By studying citizens' everyday experiences with each other and the politics that surrounds them, we can come to an understanding of how and why walls and boundaries exist in Northern Ireland today.

Borders and walls influence identity through physical processes of inclusion and exclusion. To challenge or maintain these border-induced identities, ordinary citizens create and shape their identity based on a process of Othering, in which they define an image of themselves – Us – rooted in who they are not – the Other. In this process, they create real and imagine social boundaries. Many scholars understand this social practice as a coping mechanism, in which humans – in dialogue with different state and non-state actors – communicate a sense of place, classify space and enforce control over a place or population.

To the Irish in Derry/Londonderry, Brexit and the uncertainty around a looming hard border have made them more aware of their national identity as Irish. They are afraid to lose out on the two major identity markers of the Good Friday agreement: the disappearance of a physical wall (a national border) that divides them from the Republic of Ireland, and their guaranteed identity as Irish citizens with equal rights to their British

counterparts. We understand this as a "Fear of Repetition," in which Irish citizens are afraid to resign to a perceived status of second class citizens subordinated to British superiority that characterized them in the past.

Nevertheless, our interviews and observations have shown that the everyday Irish reference to the word "British" is abstract, and that it does not refer to fellow British citizens who live in Northern Ireland. Instead, Irish citizens who use "British" actually refer to the English population in Great Britain, and sometimes even more specifically "Westminster," the place of the UK government. Irish citizens from all ages and numerous backgrounds described the British state as, amongst others, "presumptuous," "arrogant," "disease," "mafia," "clowns," and "people who are trying to be better than they are."

In this process of Other-ing, the vast majority equals their own Irish identity to that of a broader European one. Interestingly, a small segment of Irish citizens neither identifies as British nor European and instead long for unification with Ireland outside of the European Union. Hence, both groups call for a United Ireland in the process, the first group because of the fear for a hard border, the latter welcoming the border to achieve the goal of a United Ireland faster.

Among ordinary British citizens two groups exist: a minority of hardliners who welcome Brexit, and a surprisingly large group that wishes to remain part of the EU. The first minority group are primarily those who see potential in a hard border. Their British orientation leads this group to consider themselves to be the same as all British citizens in the United Kingdom and wishes to be treated as such. Rather than a "Fear of Repetition" that results directly from Brexit and a hard border, this group of British citizens defines itself based on its fear of a possible long-term consequence of Brexit, which is a United Ireland. Repeated calls for a United Ireland in both the political and social sphere instigate a "Fear of Extinction" amongst the British minority: what will be their place as British citizens in a United Ireland? To this minority group, the Other is the culture of their fellow Irish citizens. In their words, they believe Irish citizens are "fascists" and that Republicanism is "undermining people."

The second group of British citizens in Derry/Londonderry believes that they are different from the British people on the mainland. Similar to their fellow Irish citizens, they fear that the reinstatement of a hard border will emphasize the peripheral status of Derry/Londonderry. In the creation of their identity, the Other are the English people and less so their fellow Irish inhabitants of Derry/Londonderry. Thus, contrary to the Irish citizens who describe the British "Other" as an abstract label for "English," to this

group "British" means as much as "not-English." It is this latter group of British citizens that, similarly to the Irish citizens, define themselves as European.

The different perceptions and interpretations of both Irish and British citizens of their own identity, but more importantly of the identity of the "Other," sustains the need for the persistence of social and physical walls in Derry/Londonderry. These are walls that, in theory, ought to have been overcome slowly in twenty years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Because Derry/Londonderry has always looked across the open border to Donegal for trade, many British and Irish citizens fear that Brexit and the looming hard border will create an economic peripheral status of Derry/Londonderry compared to Belfast. Furthermore, Brexit has opened up a debate on the legal rights of Irish—and hence European—citizens in a British, non-European state. These walls, however, are mere perceptive concerns of ordinary citizens of what the future might hold, and have not yet become reality.

Nevertheless, the uncertainty around Brexit has already affected non-permeable social walls within the city and between its increasingly polarized citizenry today. One of these walls relates to the responses of the two biggest political parties to Brexit and the uncertainty that plays in their favor. Despite the fact that after the end of the Troubles multiple political parties gained power in Westminster, today two political parties dominate the general elections in Northern Ireland: the Irish party Sinn Fein and the British Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Sinn Féin—Irish for "Ourselves Alone"—is an all-Ireland party actively calling for a United Ireland.

Sinn Féin draws heavily on the sentiment of "the Fear of Repetition" of the Irish people—the fear to return to the economic and legal boundaries that the looming hard border might entail—in achieving this goal. In this narrative, there is little emphasis on other consequences of Brexit and the looming hard border. The Other for Sinn Féin is the DUP, the Northern Irish/British conservative party that aims for an economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. In fact, Sinn Féin has abandoned their anti-European sentiments after the vote for Brexit and became pro-European because of the DUPs anti-European stance.

The rise of Irish nationalism promoted by Sinn Féin has created renewed interest in the meaning of borders, and has let the DUP to use the same strategy by focusing on the integrity of the UK in relation to the border issue. Hence, whereas Sinn Fein actively aims to make Northern Ireland part of a new Irish Republic, the sole goal of the DUP is for

Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK. Their political stalemate pro-
motes sectarianism in the form of finger-pointing, in which Unionists
blame Sinn Féin for being divisive, and Nationalists blame the DUP for
the overall stalemate.

These kind of political practices around Brexit increase the polariza-
tion in the already polarized social and politicized environment. As a
result, ordinary citizens mentioned their fatigue of the simplified leave or
remain messages, without attention to important concerns such as social
wealth creation, or improved healthcare and education. The power sharing
settlement of Northern Ireland between the DUP and Sinn Féin guaran-
teed in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement increases this invisible wall,
not only between Sinn Féin and the DUP, but also between political par-
ties and ordinary citizens who do not feel represented.

An ex-IRA prisoner explained, however, that people in Derry/
Londonderry want to vote because "their families died for voting rights
during the Troubles." Even though he, together with a British member of
the Orange order on the other side of the political polemic, mentioned
that the "current tribal state of politics is messy," both deplored the lack
of alternative parties to vote for because they represent nothing in the big-
ger picture—unlike they did in the past. This great challenge to break old
voting habits along identity lines only has increased in the face of further
political polarization caused by Brexit, leaving 70% of the interviewees
today to vote based along identity lines. Ordinary citizens described this
form of political propaganda as a matter of: "if you do not vote for us,
you will get them."

The second reinforced wall relates to topics that people talk about, a
phenomenon that we call a discursive boundary. In fact, Brexit has
re-accentuated the differences between the two communities that, until the
referendum on Brexit, had been slowly disappearing following the Good
Friday Agreement in 1998. Rather than being aware of the "Fear of
Extinction" and "Fear of Repetition" explained previously, however,
ordinary citizens use the all-encompassing label of distrust when discus-
sing Brexit.

It is exactly this distrust around the approaches toward Brexit and
the looming hard border that has manifested itself in a social environment
in which inter-communal dialogue is limited to "clever politeness" with
those that are not part of the immediate community. When people do not
share their perspective and opinion with those from a different commu-
nity, this might result in even more prejudices and reinforced boundaries
in dialogue that leads to polarization. All this shows that a turbulent his-
tory around the border in combination with a contemporary increased

awareness of identities, have impacted real and imagined walls within the city. In turn, these walls result in increasing levels of polarization that maintain these identities and increase uncertainty and distrust.

Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the image sketched in the previous section, however popular, is but a one-sided one. Despite the process of division, Brexit also allows for a process of unification. In fact, we found important similarities between ordinary Irish and British citizens: a transnational (anti)European identity and a local anti-violence mentality. These similarities often remain invisible in the media-dominated Brexit discussion.

The first similarity is the presence of an identity that transcends both the Irish and British identities: European—and anti (or non)-European. We found that the vast majority of the Derry/Londonderry inhabitants identify as European, in addition to their Irish or British nationalities. Ordinary citizens from both backgrounds relate this inclusive identity to notions of friendship, solidarity and multiculturalism. Their desire is to continue to live their lives as members of the European Union.

At the same time, there are minority groups on both sides of the identity divide—and here it becomes interesting—who identify as anti-European. The mere presence of Brexit shows that some Brits in Northern Ireland want the British state to be "masters in their own house," without external European Union influence. Interestingly, albeit the important difference of their Irish orientation, this form of complete independence is also the wish of a small group of Irish citizens. This Irish minority group not only considers the British state as a form of colonialism and imperialism, but also wishes complete independence from the EU, the Northern Ireland parliament and interestingly, even the Irish Parliament in Dublin, because these "serve to remove democratic control from the people and […] promote the interests of capitalism and imperialism." Hence, both in majority and minority motivations for and interpretations of Brexit, Irish and British citizens are far from opposites.

The second similarity between Irish and British citizens is one that shows how the uncertainties caused by Brexit and the possible return of a hard border right next to their city can overcome differences and social and physical walls within the city. This relates primarily to violence within the city. In fact, the (international) media suggest a straightforward relation between Brexit, borders and violence, an image that was particularly reinforced by the death of young investigative journalist Lyra McKee in April 2019. Our interviews and observations, however, showed that a narrative of violence in the international media

has also led to an all-encompassing wish to break down the different walls in the city. In other words: Brexit has reinforced numerous walls, but also provides ordinary citizens the opportunity to overcome the resulting polarization.

In fact, we found that ordinary citizens employ a grassroots opposition to violence: almost all interviewees said that "we do not want to go back [to the Troubles]" and that those perpetrating violence do not have the support of the community. Whereas most of this opposition to violence is passive, the city has seen increasing acts condemning violence. One example of active disapproval of violence occurred after the death of Lyra Mckee, when Irish Republican citizens put red crosses on billboards around the city that called for violence.

An ex-IRA prisoner acknowledged this struggle against his own closed community—which he believed is putting up even more walls after the vote for Brexit. However, he—amongst others—also believed that when violence does not forward the struggle, people should change their tactics, and he has identified a wide range of Irish Republicans that have detached themselves from violent organizations, believing that "violence has proven futile." Even a British Loyalist and "remainer" mentioned that "hard-line Loyalism is sick of it. There is no energy there." The city is the archetype of crossing walls because, despite the fact that the majority of grassroots organizations are identity-based, many aim to bring the Irish and British communities together. Herein, numerous ex-Loyalist and ex-Republican paramilitaries are given an opportunity to speak about their experiences, both to adults and children, and reconcile with (families of) their victims. Finally, on a spatial note, various murals depicting violent events of the past are repainted.

This hidden process of connection leads us to argue that precisely Brexit offers opportunities for bridges across social boundaries to be build faster than otherwise would be likely, because it forces people to think and position themselves with regards to what might happen. Nevertheless, due to the persisting social and physical walls erected over a long history of distrust, ordinary citizens remain largely unaware of the parallels between them. It remains in the hands of ordinary citizens to transcend their differences. In the words of one respondent: "people are living more apart now than they ever have since the British came to Ireland in the 16th century, but they live in peace." And if it is up to Derry/Londonderry's ordinary citizens, their lives remain peaceful.

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