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Something new under the sun?

The lessons of Algeria and Greenland

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The UK is the first fully fledged Member State ever to decide to withdraw from the EU. But it is not the first country to do so. While the case of Greenland – an autonomous part of Denmark which left the European Community (EC) in 1985 – is sometimes mentioned in Brexit discussions, other cases are largely unknown. Only five years after the Treaty of Rome, in 1962, Algeria took the same step as part of its assertion of independence from France. And despite all the debates about Brexit, Grexit, and other scenarios in our own times, even among EU experts, few know that the Caribbean island of Saint-Barthélemy, a French overseas collectivity, changed its status in 2012 from an Outermost Region of the EU to that of an Overseas Country or Territory.

This chapter discusses the lessons that can be learned for Brexit from the ‘Algexit’ of 1962 and the ‘Greenexit’ of 1985, these being the two cases for which the medium- and long-term effects of withdrawal can be assessed, and for which archival records are available (Patel 2017). It argues that important lessons can be learnt from these earlier experiences, despite the obvious differences from today’s situation with the UK. Most importantly, it highlights the complex relationship between processes of integration and disintegration as a more permanent feature of the European integration process than existing research has had it.
Taking (back) control

The stakes were high and the message was clear. The leading representative of the leave camp argued that his island was very special ‘in terms of language, culture, economy and social structure’. Moreover, he stressed the islanders’ intention of ‘developing on the basis of locally generated values.’ For all these reasons, it was vitally important to sever the ties with Brussels ‘in order to preserve the peculiarity of the country.’ While that might sound like Nigel Farage, these were in fact the words of Greenland’s Prime Minister Jonathan Motzfeldt, speaking on behalf of Greenland’s government prior to the 1982 referendum. On the world’s largest island with a population of some 50,000, dissatisfaction with the EC had been gaining momentum for quite some time. Economic arguments centring on the EC’s Common Fisheries Policy as a challenge to the island’s most important sector coalesced with debates about identity. Already in 1972, when Denmark held an EC membership referendum, 70 per cent of Greenlanders opted against accession, but their vote was overruled by the majority in the country as a whole. Back then, there had been little Greenland could do. After Denmark granted home rule in 1979, however, Greenland held a membership referendum in 1982, which ultimately led to its withdrawal from the European Community three years later.

Sovereignty, self-determination and the desire to take back control played an even bigger role in the Algerian case. The country entered the EC as part of France. When the Treaty of Rome was signed, France still had vast colonial possessions, and the link between metropolitan France and Algeria was particularly strong. Article 227 therefore stipulated that most of the Treaty’s regulations also applied to the North African country, which thus became a part of the original community of six Member States. The Algerian War of Independence, waged for eight long years with hundreds of thousands of deaths and many more eventually forced to flee the country, was fought mainly to shake off the yoke of French rule. But, unsurprisingly, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) also wanted to cut the connection with the EC. Looking back a few months after independence had been won, Algeria’s first president Ahmed Ben Bella deplored the ‘300 years of colonial domination’ and heavily criticised the EC, particularly its nascent Common Agricultural Policy (Ben Bella 1963, 7).

Europe’s colonial past is therefore central to explaining why Algeria and Greenland became part of the EC; in both cases, integration into the...
European Community did not result from a sovereign decision by the people of the country, but was determined by the will of the motherland. Obviously, the situation of today’s UK is markedly different: it first formally applied in the early 1960s, was admitted in 1973, and has since enjoyed all the rights and obligations of full membership. Still, the mix of economic and identity arguments that drove the Brexit campaign has certain parallels in the Algerian and Greenlandic cases. In all three countries, the specific history, values, forms of economic and political governance, and the social fabric all turned into key arguments for withdrawal. The EC/EU was accused of not accommodating these differences. The desire to (re)gain control therefore unites all these cases. This also distinguishes all three of them from the debates about the option of a Greek withdrawal from the eurozone, which was much more about a state’s inability to live up to the commitments of membership.

Undoing and reconnecting

Some three months after his aforementioned speech, Ben Bella wrote a letter to the president of the European Commission, Walter Hallstein. Given his public announcements, his request might have come as a surprise. He requested that despite Algeria’s withdrawal from the EC, existing rules and regulations should remain in force. Algeria was thus to be treated as if it was still part of the European Community.³ And what did Greenland’s Motzfeldt do in parallel with his leave campaign? As the island’s prime minister, he quickly negotiated an association agreement with the EC (Patel 2017). Both countries thus opted for a paradoxical double move. On the one hand, they sought greater sovereignty, control and independence. On the other hand, they were highly interested in maintaining close ties to the EC, mainly for economic reasons.

And, surprisingly, close ties continued to exist in both cases even after withdrawal. Given that Ben Bella wrote his letter on 24 December, one might be tempted to speak of a Christmas miracle since, in fact, the European Community basically accepted Algeria’s request. Half a year later, in June 1963, a secret document of the EC Council of Ministers noted that Algeria was treated ‘de facto as a Member State of the Community.’⁴ Greenland also quickly obtained its association agreement. Several Member States were highly interested in close links with the island, not least due to its rich fishing waters. This holds particularly true for the Federal Republic of Germany, whose fishing lobby pressed Bonn to push this point. Denmark’s position was particularly awkward: since
Greenland continued to be part of the Danish Realm (*Det Danske Rige*), it was the Danish government that had to submit the withdrawal proposal in Brussels – despite strongly disliking the islanders’ decision. Copenhagen therefore also supported the association deal in an attempt to limit the damage (Patel 2017). The role of the British government is particularly interesting: during the referendum campaign, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office enquired informally in the Danish capital whether it could help positively influence public opinion in Greenland, as London was afraid that the Arctic example might unleash disintegration tendencies elsewhere. Ironically, it was the government of Margaret Thatcher – the nightmare of every Brussels bureaucrat – that was especially concerned about the repercussions of Greenland’s exit and worked to avert it.⁵

The situation of the UK today bears both similarities and differences to these processes in Algeria and Greenland. Worlds separate the scope and depth of European integration today from the pre-Maastricht and pre-Lisbon realities of the 1960s and 1980s. Economically and geographically, the UK is a giant in comparison to Algeria or Greenland. The international system has changed markedly too, with the end of the Cold War and a new era of insecurity challenging core pillars of governance in Europe and the wider transatlantic context. In the British case, Prime Minister Theresa May has declared that she was prepared to accept hard Brexit and has stressed that she did not want the UK ‘half-in, half-out’. She also stated that it was her ‘priority’ to pursue a ‘free trade agreement with the EU’ (May 2017a). Negotiations might thus lead to comparably loose ties between the remaining EU and the UK – in the context of the range of relationships the EU has with states such as Norway, Iceland and Switzerland. Still, it reveals that even a large trading and military power such as the UK relies on keeping some close ties with the EU, and that the populist idea of regaining full sovereignty and autonomy is partly impossible.

**Incremental solutions**

As the cases of Algeria and Greenland reveal, there has never been a default mode for leaving the EC/EU. Today, the Lisbon Treaty’s famous Article 50 has created a procedure for withdrawal, although it also leaves a lot of room to decide on the details of the deal. How, then, did Algeria’s and Greenland’s relationships develop after pulling out? The following assessment will not judge whether the deals were beneficial for one side or the other – for that, much more space would be needed. Instead, it will examine the intensity of the formal ties to the EC/EU – as the more
straightforward yardstick that reflects the chapter’s interest in the political and legal dimensions of withdrawal.

Algexit can be summarised as a trajectory from ‘super-soft’ to ‘super-hard’ and from there again to a softer constellation. For several years in the 1960s, the country retained a precarious special status that kept lawyers awake at night. As late as 1968, an internal EC document maintained that its close relations with Algeria still lacked a clear legal basis. With regard to trade, the country continued to float in an undefined twilight zone, almost as if it was still part of the common market. Gradually, however, Algeria’s privileged position crumbled. The EC’s Member States started to apply different rules in their trade with the North African country. And as the common Market was established and the common organisation of the market for more and more specific commodities agreed on, the former colony increasingly found itself on the wrong side of the fence. The common organisation of the wine market, established in 1970, was the hardest blow. Around 1960, Algeria had been the globe’s fourth largest producer of wine. Domestic consumption was small in the mostly Muslim country, but it was the world’s biggest exporter. Wine accounted for half the country’s exports, and it mainly traded with EC countries. With the 1970 market organisation, the EC’s protectionist Common Agricultural Policy created insurmountable trade barriers, which had a deleterious effect on Algerian wine exports. Algiers complained bitterly about these measures, but to little avail. Meanwhile, wine producers in the Member States were happy to be rid of competitors from the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Today, Algeria produces hardly any wine at all, and this had much to do with its relationship with the EC/EU. In a nutshell, therefore, ‘Algexit’ also led to ‘Alcexit’, at least in the longer term (Meloni & Swinnen 2014).

From this low point in the 1970s, EU–Algeria relations slowly improved over the past four decades. Building on several smaller agreements, the two partners concluded an association agreement in 2002 and later added further steps. Still, it has long lost the special status it held in the years immediately after 1962. In many ways, it is now treated as any other North African country; the special ties from a colonial past that impacted on the first decade after independence having withered away.

In contrast, Greenland’s exit was consistently soft. Despite the concern about foreign fishermen plundering its rich waters, Greenland agreed to a series of protocols to the association agreement, which granted the EC extensive access to its fisheries, a point insisted on by the West Germans in particular. Since then, relations have intensified further. Today, Greenland is one of the EU’s Overseas Countries and Territories, where primary and secondary EU law applies automatically, though with
some derogations. Trade relations are so intense that Greenland has, ironically, started to move closer to the EU compared with the situation in 1985. In contrast, devolution within the Danish context has continued, with some activists in Greenland now demanding full independence from the Danish Realm. This could lead to a reversal of the dynamics of the 1980s, when Greenlanders wanted to remain part of the Kingdom, but rejected EC membership.

At this stage, it remains unclear what kind of deal the UK and the EU will ultimately agree on. It is rather unlikely that this question will be answered as quickly as some Brexiteers would like, or within the two-year period stipulated by the Lisbon Treaty. The experience of Algeria and Greenland is a reminder that a new settlement will only be the basis for the next phase, and not the once-and-for-all, clear-cut solution that the exit camp likes to imagine.

**Colonial legacies**

Taking stock of the historical experience also highlights a dimension that has long seemed obsolete: Europe’s colonial past. This was clearly at the core of Algeria’s and Greenland’s experience, and also impacted on the recent decision of Saint-Barthélemy, an island ‘discovered’ by Christopher Columbus and, with some interruptions, a French colony since the seventeenth century. Brexit also conjures up a colonial past. Theresa May’s optimism, in her 17 January 2017 speech, that the idea of deepening links to ‘India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, countries in Africa’ will be met by similar feelings in these former British colonies has yet to prove itself. Moreover, she had a good point about the need to ‘strengthen the precious union between the four nations of the UK’ (May 2017a): Northern Ireland, whose past some historians consider to be principally colonial history, is obviously a case in point, where one can only hope that the peace agreement will hold. And it is worrying that as soon as the Brexit referendum’s results were made public, Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel García-Margallo declared that the day had come closer when the Spanish flag will fly over Gibraltar (Amón 2016). Disintegration in the EU has the potential to reopen the door to seemingly remote chapters in Europe’s unsettled past. Most Europeans have never heard about the 1713 Peace of Utrecht that forced Spain to cede Gibraltar to Great Britain, and a UK withdrawal would obviously ignore the 96 per cent of voters in Gibraltar who opted for ‘remain’ in the referendum. Not only Northern Ireland and Scotland, but also Gibraltar thus
has the potential of turning into a key stumbling block in the Brexit negotiations. So while exit decisions are seemingly about a country’s future, they are also closely related to the continent’s haunted past.

Conclusions

The cases of Algeria and Greenland demonstrate that withdrawal from the EC/EU is not completely unprecedented. Admittedly, the integration process has changed massively since the 1960s and 1980s, as have the wider European and global contexts. Moreover, the UK is a power of a different calibre than the two earlier ‘exiteers’. Still, their trajectories are quite revealing, especially with regard to the motives leading a majority to opt to leave the EC/EU. In addition, in both cases the complex renegotiation process at the moment of exit did not lead to a complete unwinding of ties, and the long-term trajectories after withdrawal were of great importance.

History reveals that the details of the deal, and the historical context informing it, both impacted massively on the eventual outcome. Very often, negotiators on both sides of the table shared an interest in maintaining close ties, at least initially, regardless of public rhetoric. While the exit settlement matters a lot, of course, the substantial minority that opted for ‘remain’ in the Brexit referendum might yet find some consolation in history. Any deal will be a precursor to the next deal, as this chapter shows, and in that sense, hardly any decision is fully irreversible – for better or for worse.

Finally, examining instances of withdrawal from the EC/EU conveys an important message concerning the history of the European integration process. A careful historical assessment challenges the logic of the ‘ever deeper union’, as a powerful narrative the EU itself has forged and helped to disseminate. In this standard story, there is no place for phases and processes of disintegration; that is why Brexit is perceived as such a fundamental challenge to the EU. As shown here, however, Brexit would in fact not be the first moment of disentanglement and disintegration in the EU’s history. This reminds us how little attention EU history has attracted so far, and that even some basic facts have no impact whatsoever on the public debate. For all the talk about crisis, the European integration process has mastered difficult moments with astonishing resilience. In doing so, it has undergone fundamental transformations, and the multiplicity of crises it presently faces are most worrying. Still, the stakes for the UK are certainly higher than for the EU.