When the sea does have character: post-Brexit maritime cooperation as place-consciousness

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Challenges and outlooks from the case of post-Brexit English Channel Space
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• Brexit discontinued the INTERREG Programmes across the Channel/Manche;

• This affects the ‘place-consciousness’ that local bodies and communities has been coproducing around across the Channel for decades;

• A stormy stretch of water (physical features) able to produce its own ‘character of life’ (or cité: Sennett 2019);

• This also has some bearing on how space is being produced across/around the Channel: from a place of connection/separation/co-operation to UK’s insular mentalité.
How to create maritime space-consciousness

- Communities contribute, through spatial production, to infusing their character of life into a specific place (cf. spatial turn);
- It turns the geographical features and the natural environment into a cultural environment;
- From the ontology of the Channel to its being meaningful to its communities: **Channel as a repository of their character of life.**
- **The topic has been usually studied in relation to the production of the landscape.**
- Kentish landscape/infrastructures: from connection to its arcifinous post-Brexit role (cf Hubbard 2022)
- Dunkerque/Dieppe/Calais: from *villes portuaires* to *villes frontalières* involved in the production of space (*Picouet & Renard*).
But ... the sea?

• The idea of the production of space usually refers to land not to the sea;

• Cf terrestrial landscapes: patterns of things on the land (Castree et al. 2003);

• Territorialised paradigm accounts for how we humans get hold of a given territory and make it meaningful and useful to us (cf. Nicolini 2022);

• The sea does not have character (Schmitt 1950); territoire vide (Corbin 1990); humans pass through it; ‘Il ne laisse pas de trace, sauf ses poubelles’ (Frémont 1996).
Interreg and the Channel

• The Channel: a stretch of water and **not** a tract of land (Thomas 2006):

• Dover and Calais but also Dieppe, Dunkerque, or Brighton are not true binational (Heddebaut 2001);

• Funds intended only for terrestrial frontiers (cf Art. 10 Reg. (EEC) No 2052/88);

• **Imaginative leap**: the Tunnel (fixed link under the Treaty of Canterbury: the **Weald-Artois Anticline?**) persuaded the Commission.

• Channel: turning its ‘maritime’ nature into a ‘terrestrial’ one.
The Imaginative Leap

• Kent and Nord-Pas-de-Calais were deploying their own place-consciousness and were coproducing their own character of life through ‘an appropriation and transformation of space and nature’.

• They were projecting their own imaginative geography onto ‘their’ stretch of water.

• In coproducing the Channel as a maritime space, these communities conveyed the outcomes of their imagined geographies and ‘reproductive’ practices.

• In so doing, they turned the Channel into a lived geography and changed the meaning of the maritime border.
And the law?

• They changed the interpretation of Art. 10 Reg. 2052/88: their imaginative geogrphy promoted a change in how to regulate cross-border cooperation;

• The law as a perfomative practice involved in spatial production: Its features are enriched by new factors without the necessity of formally altering the law.

• This gives expression to the view that, as the place-space-environment nexus changes over time, so too should the meaning of the law.
An act of ‘geo-graphing’

• The Channel and maritime cooperation reflect the culture-specific relation between the community and ‘its’ marine space.

• The seal of the former is impressed into the waves and subsequently entrenched into the EU legal framework for cross-border cooperation.

• This makes asymmetry between the partners (UK counties and French departments or regions) less problematic;

• Loose formalisation of cooperation is unproblematic: cooperation is consonant with constitutional orders.
Brexit: challenging the character of the Channel

• Robert Tombs (2022): the UK as ‘a European country’ unlike any other; it gravitates towards the continental landmass, which it ‘rarely’ joins.

• Revitalising imperial ambitions (e.g. ‘Global Britain’ or the ‘Anglosphere’).

• Brexit as an oceanic entreprise: new routes.

• Brexit means Brexit: discontinuing maritime cooperation
The ‘deep topography’ of the Channel

• à la recherche of the legal-spatial practices that still make up the Channel’s character of life in the aftermath of Brexit.

• If they want to take hold of their maritime place, communities must rearrange their imaginative leap through a constant exercise in legal geographical creativity to fit imagined legal geographies into the complexity of the post-Brexit real world.
Coastal liquidity and the paradox of Brexit

• Art. 3 and 4 of the Treaty: from geometrical lines to coastal liquidity as regards the fixed link and police control

• The White Horse (1998), the Pride of Brexit (2019), the SOS Message;

• Brexit ‘borderscape’, which has been developed to mark ‘a fluid, mobile, open zone of differentiated encounters – a border zone without borders’ (Anderson et al.)
Normalising the Channel

• A real place of encounter, where identity and belonging are forged when, in Hubbard’s words, the ‘edge of England’ and mainland Europe, merge into each other.

• Charlie Connelly has entitled his recent book The Channel – not The English Channel.

• The University of Caen website hosts the Atlas TransManche, which displays the whole area (the sea, the coast, and local authorities) bordering it.

• The Channel as ‘common sense’ and a ‘sense of commonness’.
Concluding Remarks
(1)

• Brexit might be able to strip away most of the layers related to the Channel’s place-consciousness;
• It may have turned the Channel’s character of life into a politically contested and socially fractured context;
• BUT: the Channel is a powerful legal-geographical feature;
• The imaginative leap has impressed lost-lasting marks on the Channel;
Concluding remarks (2)

• Brexit challenged the coastal liquidity of EU maritime cooperation formalistically;

• It considered the Channel a merely synthetic jurisdiction, not the outcome of a process of legal-spatial production;

• Deleting the Surface layer (the EU legal framework) did not entail erasing the other spatial practices making up the Channel’s carácter of life.

• With its ebbs and flows, could Brexit realistically submerge the vivacity of the communities across the Channel, imposing on them a new character from “outside”?

• Political (local) cooperation (Straits Committee) demonstrates that the carácter of life with its imaginative leap is still there.