

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann
Podcast Contribution, Author: Lukas Aresta
Book: Bob A. N. Grypants: *Fuck You*. Lodon, Michael Joseph 2016.

JOHN BULL'S ROAD TO BREXIT

Speaker:

Oh great and mighty Farage! O amphibian overlord!

Author:

In his book *Fuck You*, a satirist who calls himself Bob A. N. Grypants, read 'angrypants', looks back with disgust on the 'horrible year' 2016.

Speaker:

*David Icke was right! From the Draco constellation comes a race
That threatens to put humanity to the sword
Whilst hiding behind the reassuring posture of a smiling face;
Yet in Farage the mask has slipped, he lets fall reptilian words,
Whilst beaming bonhomie here, there and all over the place.
Like John Bull, red britches swapped for a quotidian suit and
beefsteak for a pint of pride,
His jovial gurning distracts from a hatred that's never articulated,
just implied.*

Author:

In this unflattering portrait of Nigel Farage, leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, we encounter three symbols of Englishness: beef, ale and the fictitious character of John Bull, a national stereotype representing the English 'Everyman'.

Speaker:

Who is John Bull, this enduring symbol of Englishness?

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Like Britannia, an allegorical figure representing the British nation, John Bull has become a national symbol, but unlike Britannia, John Bull is, in fact, a representation of the English middle-class male only. He is at times distinctively anti-Scottish, anti-absolutist or even anti-establishment. Although the figure of John Bull has wide currency independent of any single work, this fictitious character originated in an early 18th-century satire. Ever since, John Bull has been depicted as a sturdy, side-whiskered, ruddy-cheeked middle-aged Englishman with a considerable potbelly, wearing a Union Jack waistcoat, riding-gear, top-hat and boots, holding a club and a pint of porter. In the 19th century, he acquired the English stiff upper-lip, becoming more restrained and understated, but retained his peaceable air, his aversion to tax and corruption, his jingoism, anti-Catholicism, Gallophobia, and distrust in all things foreign. Thus, John Bull epitomises the traditional type of the portly Englishman who has plenty of beef and ale and whose best friend is a sturdy bulldog. In fact, even before John Bull's genesis in print and visual art, the bull, beef and the bulldog had already been emblems of Englishness and English wealth, plenty and strength. And while the French purportedly only ate *soupe maigre*, and the Scottish had to limit themselves to porridge or haggis, Englishmen gorged themselves on tender sirloin beefsteaks.

Ironically, it was precisely England's pride in their beef that led to the first major crises with the European Economic Community in the late 1990s: due to mad-cow disease some European countries refused to import English beef, increasing British hostility towards Europe and reviving jingoistic tones in favour of free trade with the member states of the Commonwealth of Nations. The defence of free-trade had indeed already been the reason why Britain joined the First World War.

In the first decades of the 20th century, the character had become highly emblematic, and leading politicians of the time appeared in the attire of John Bull. Winston Churchill, for example, a bulldog at his side, called himself

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Speaker:

‘John Bull number one’.

Author:

Nigel Farage, a leading advocate of Brexit, is very much a John Bull figure. He is frequently depicted holding a pint of ale, appearing as a boon companion. Not only is Farage’s blustering voice in clear opposition to French refinement, but also, he tries to look placid, honest, plain-spoken and half duped by those

Speaker:

“fanatics in Brussels”.

Author:

However, as the opening lines have suggested, there is much to be said for seeing him as an astute John Bull figure

Speaker:

“whose jovial gurning distracts from a hatred that is never articulated, just implied”.

Author:

And like the fictitious 18th-century John Bull, Nigel Farage purports that authentic English liberty can only be preserved in isolation from the continent.