

# Imagine a world without borders: an immunologist's thoughts on Brexit

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See also: **F Gannon** (September 2016) and **S Curry** (September 2016)

**D**id you know that the mafia was started in Sicily as a civil organization to protect the interests of local business from foreign governments far away on the Continent? Does this sound familiar to those who voted for Brexit? Yet, the mafia morphed into an ugly monster fueled by fear, hatred, greed, and a thirst for power. The Allies revived the organization after World War II because they had a vested interest in suppressing emerging socialist movements and appointed local bosses to replace fascist mayors [1]. In Sicily, the arms race between state and mafia led to the atrocities of 1992, when judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino were brutally murdered.

Just a year before, the “Scuola Superiore di Immunologia Ruggero Ceppellini” was founded in Naples. Serafino Zappacosta and other visionaries wanted to “foster wider interest in immunology and attract to the discipline young scientists, also from disadvantaged countries”. The school attracts young scientists and world-class teachers [2]. Silvia Fontana-Zappacosta, Antonio di Giacomo, and Tricia Reynolds continue the founder’s work with enthusiasm, no remuneration, let alone profit. The mafia and the school of immunology, which has connections all over the world, are two examples from southern Italy that illustrate the opposite results of choosing between universal benefits and national interests.

The result of the referendum in Britain has shaken the EU to its core. Nationalist movements—not just in Britain but elsewhere in the EU—now threaten to end the ongoing experiment of a unified continent. Although its regulations are frustrating and

stifling, the idea of a union must be defended.

We are all connected. In 1945, the Allies controlled southern Italy where my grandfather used to travel for work in his van between Naples and Puglia. A father of three, he was killed in a car accident with a military convoy of the British Army Intelligence Corps in Naples. My mother and her two brothers grew up without a father and with very little comfort, like so many of her generation. Her younger brother became a doctor, trained with Ruggero Ceppellini, one of the great Italian scientists of his time, and became a renowned scientist [3]. I followed in his footsteps and now work at the University of Cambridge with my friend and colleague Ashley Moffett. In 1945, her father was driving military convoys around Naples. We have asked each other many times: Had my grandfather ever met her father?

Our students must think we form an odd duo: An Irish English doctor trained at Cambridge and Oxford and a southern Italian doctor trained all over Europe. Two years ago, we taught a course at the Scuola Superiore di Immunologia, supported by the European Federation of Immunological Societies, the *European Journal of Immunology*, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Our course near Naples attracted 59 participants from 27 countries from all continents. Time seems to give you a break to discuss with colleagues from all over the world when you teach at the school. And yet, the Vesuvio reminds you that nothing is permanent and you better make your life count.

In response to the catastrophe of WWII, Europe laid the foundation for the EU, which has brought peace to a continent that had been plagued by 2000 years of war and

conflict. But the referendum in Britain and political movements all over the world show that this is no longer enough to overcome tribalism and nationalism. It is about time we start a new project that builds upon another powerful human instinct: generosity. We must realize that sharing prevents conflict and breeds prosperity.

Scientists are well aware of the benefits of cooperation and sharing. The academic world has been without borders for more than 900 years and shared knowledge has greatly benefited mankind. The very meaning of the word “University” nullifies the concept of borders, and we cannot compromise on our great achievement. Whatever the future holds for the EU, we must resist descending back into nationalist fervor. Only a world without borders and national interests may cherish knowledge, education, health, and the respect of human rights, giving equal opportunities to all worldwide. As scientists, we can lead by example to create a society where there is “nothing to kill or die for”.

## References

1. Norman Lewis (1964) *The honoured society*. Eland ISBN 978-0907871-48-4
2. Di Giacomo A (2014) . *Eur J Immunol* 44: 1573–1574
3. Tosi M (1997) . *Res Immunol* 148: 211–216



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