

SIGNAL FAILURE OR MISRECOGNITION? BREXIT, AUSTERITY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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On a recent train journey I found myself in a crowded carriage standing with a large group of anti-Trump protesters on their way to a demonstration in London. Earlier that day Donald Trump, with characteristic disregard for diplomatic protocol, had made headline news by intervening in the Conservative Party leadership contest saying that he thought Boris Johnson would make a ‘great Prime Minister’. Repeating his support for Brexit, he also spoke about a future US trade deal that would put everything on the table, including the National Health Service. As our train ground to a halt between stations and the driver announced we were being held up due to ‘signal failure’ at Gatwick, I fell into conversation with Mark, a middle-aged anti-Trump protester from Lewes. Mark had just spent the past week in the suburbs of Sheffield and had been shocked by the levels of deprivation and poverty. Being there, he understood why people had voted ‘leave’: their main message, he said, was simply ‘f*** the lot of you!’

The state of the UK’s railways provides a useful metaphor for making sense of the British government’s Brexit negotiations. Here too was a story of bad management, delayed timetables, derailed plans and public misery. It was ‘signal failure’ by all parties. As anthropologist Sarah Green wrote, the ‘leave’ announcement of June 2016 ‘felt giddily unreal, as though we had not known our own force and were shocked at the blood now spattered on the carpet’.¹ The

¹ Sarah Green et al, “Brexit Referendum: first reactions from anthropology,” *Social Anthropology* 24 (2016), 479.

reality of Brexit is a nightmare the country is struggling to awaken from. Three years on, what has changed in the UK? How should we explain this extraordinary political rupture? And what are implications of that blood-spattered Brexit carpet for the future of European integration?

To answer the first question, very little has changed. Three years after the 2016 referendum and British politics seem as broken and unstable as ever. If anything, the UK is even more polarised over Europe. Public frustration over government failures to deliver on its promises has reached a record high, and what started as a party-political crisis is becoming a constitutional and existential crisis as well. The Conservative Party remains locked in its internal power struggles and the opposition Labour Party continues to prevaricate over where it stands or whether it will endorse a second referendum. Most of the Labour's younger supporters want to remain in the EU but its leader Jeremy Corbyn, like other old-school, anti-EU 'Lexiteers', are resolutely opposed, seeing the EU as an obstacle to their vision for a socialist Britain. The idea of a 'no-deal Brexit', once considered the nuclear option or at best a negotiating ploy, looks increasingly likely. Boris Johnson has promised that Britain will leave the EU by 31st October whatever Parliament or the High Court may say. Only the Liberal Democrats have gone on record to say they would revoke Article 50 and remain in the EU. The public attitude has become one of dangerous impatience: 'just get on with it!'

As for the factors that produced the ‘leave’ vote, not much has changed here either. Brexit was driven by a decade of austerity politics ushered in by David Cameron’s Conservative government, a precipitous drop in living standards, stagnating wages and the rising tide of ‘nationalist populism’ that this helped to unleash. Many working-class voters living in Britain’s more deprived areas felt alienated and abandoned by government and the metropolitan elites who benefit most from the EU: victims of an indifferent ‘Kafkaesque welfare bureaucracy’² that is more concerned with cutting child benefit and working tax credits, and restructuring labour markets around part-time or zero-hour contracts than with maintaining public services or tackling poverty and inequality.³ It is hardly surprising that those who felt left behind were so receptive to the xenophobic messages of right-wing parties like UKIP who blamed immigrants, a corrupt political establishment and the European Union for threatening their already diminished livelihoods. The Leave campaign slogan ‘take back control’ had an easy and compelling appeal. Despite claims to the contrary, the era of austerity has not ended; it has simply become institutionalised and normalised. But austerity has also brought to the surface a harm that was already there.

² Hugh Gusterson, “From Brexit to Trump: Anthropology and the rise of nationalist populism”, *American Ethnologist*, 44(2017), 211.

³ Gillian Evans, “Brexit Britain: Why we are all postindustrial now,” *American Ethnologist* 44 (2017), 215-219; Insa Koch, “What’s in a vote? Brexit beyond culture wars,” *American Ethnologist* 44 (2017), 225-230; Kathy Powell, “Brexit positions: neoliberalism, austerity and immigration—the (im)possibilities? of political revolution,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 41(2017), 225-240.

The political philosopher Charles Taylor defines this as the consequences for people's identities that arise when there is an absence recognition, or when that absence becomes a 'form of oppression' that saddles its victims with 'a crippling self-hatred'.⁴ As in Donald Trump's America, the dismissal of the post-industrial working class by condescending cosmopolitan elites has exacerbated that misrecognition and resulted in what anthropologist Hugh Gusterson calls 'domestic orientalism'⁵ – a post-colonial stereotyping and denigration of the rust-belt America.

This legacy of austerity-fuelled xenophobia is well captured by comedian *Mike Harding*. In a scathing reply to Theresa May's letter of November 2018 appealing to the nation to unite around her Brexit deal Harding wrote:

Your party's little civil war has divided this country irreparably. The last time this happened Cromwell discontinued the custom of kings wearing their heads on their shoulders. [...] You have made this country a vicious and much diminished place. You as Home Sec sent a van round telling foreigners to go home. You said 'illegal' but that was bollocks as the legally here people of the Windrush generation soon discovered. [...] Your party has sold off our railways, water, electricity, gas, telecoms, Royal

⁴ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 25-26.

⁵ Gusterson, *From Brexit to Trump*, p. 211.

Mail etc until all we have left is the NHS and that is lined up for the US to have as soon as Hannon and Hunt can arrange it.

Mrs May you have helped to divide this country to such an extent that families and friends are now no longer talking to each other, you have managed to negotiate a deal far worse than the one we had and all to keep together a party of millionaires, Eton Bullingdon boys, spivs and WI harridans. Your party conserves nothing. It has sold everything off in the name of the free market.⁶

Sadly, that same free market is hailed as Britain's post-Brexit salvation. So how has Brexit impacted on the European Union? The EU elections showed contradictory trends. The centre-right European People's Party and the centre-left Socialists and Democrats remained the largest blocs yet both lost seats to the Greens, Liberals and to populist nationalist parties. In France, the National Rally (led by Marine Le Pen) topped the poll, as did the 'Lega' in Italy (led by Matteo Salvini) and the Brexit Party in the UK (led by Nigel Farage). In Poland and Hungary the right-wing nationalist Law and Order party and Fides also did well. Yet while these parties often challenge EU norms and budget rules, none want to break the EU system or leave. As President of the European Council Donald Tusk argues, Brexit has 'immunised' the rest of Europe and people are 'cleaving'

⁶ Mike Harding, "Response to Theresa May's Letter appealing for unity on Brexit," *The New European*, 30 November 2018. Available at: <https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/top-stories/mike-harding-response-to-theresa-may-brexit-letter-1-5796884>.

to the EU because they see what is happening in the UK and realise the costs of leaving. Significantly, this was the first EU election in history where voter turnout actually increased; reversing a forty-year decline. However, for many voters, the benefits of remaining are not that clear either.

For the UK, Brexit is a national disaster that, for many observers including this one, feels like we are watching a slow-motion train crash. Yet it is also a wake-up call for the rest of Europe. As Brian, one of the British council estate residents interviewed by anthropologist Insa Koch declared: 'Democracy means nothing when you are uneducated and poor'.⁷ The referendum vote was a message by the forgotten people of Britain expressing their need to be heard. It was also a 'vote of no-confidence in the people in power who are meant to serve them ... [by] people who felt they had little left to lose'.⁸ That is what is so scary about Brexit. The challenge for Europe's mainstream parties, if they are to survive, will be to convince those people they are being listened to and that democracy - and the liberal values that sustain it - are worth defending against the onslaught of right-wing populist nationalists. This is more than simply attending to signal failure; like repairing Britain's decrepit railway system, it will require serious investment in the political infrastructure, starting with an end to austerity and culminating in a

⁷ Koch, What's in a vote?, p. 288.

⁸ Green, Brexit Referendum, p. 483.

new kind of social contract between citizens and the state – whether that be the fragmented British nation state or the European Union.

Cris Shore, professor of Anthropology and Head of Department at Goldsmiths University of London, was previously Chair of Social Anthropology at Auckland University (2003-2018). His main research field is political anthropology, particularly the study of organisations and processes of social transformation. A long-time observer of European politics and institutions, he has conducted fieldwork in various countries including Italy (on political parties and corruption), Brussels (on EU civil servants), New Zealand (on university reform and neoliberalism) and Canada, Australia and the UK (on the state and constitutional reform).

His most recent book, with David Williams, is *The Shapeshifting Crown: Locating the State in Postcolonial Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). Based on Marsden funded research, this analyses the complex and contradictory meanings of the ‘Crown’ and the work it performs in countries whose political systems are based on the Westminster model of government.