Britain, Brexit and Euroscepticism

Anthropological Perspectives on Angry Politics, Technopopulism and the UK Referendum

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ABSTRACT

When history books about Brexit are written a key question asked will be ‘*how* did it happen?’ How did a country renowned for stable governments, pragmatism and diplomacy produce a chaotic outcome so harmful to its economic interests and international standing? This article examines the factors that produced Brexit by analysing its political and historical context, the main campaign groups and their communication strategies. Drawing on the work of Verdery (1999), Maskovsky and Bjork-James (2020) and other anthropologists, I suggest we need to look beyond conventional political science concepts and consider Brexit in terms of ‘enchantment’, ‘angry politics’ and ‘technopopulism’. I conclude that while Brexit provides a window for analysing fault lines in contemporary Britain, it also highlights problems in the EU, its austerity politics and democratic deficit.

KEYWORDS

Austerity, angry politics, enchantment, nationalism, technopopulism, Brexit, European Union

Introduction: Towards an Anthropology of Brexit

Let me start this article on a personal note.¹ Brexit is not a subject I enjoy talking or thinking about these days. For four years between 2016 and 2020 it was the national obsession that dominated UK public debate, sucking out the oxygen from the room and leaving no space for any other issue. The 2016 referendum on Britain’s EU membership was a bruising and traumatic process, particularly for ‘remain’ supporters. While the issue was one of huge constitutional and democratic importance, it was not so much ‘deliberated’ as angrily fought over through heated exchanges and televised shouting matches. This was a far cry from what political scientists call ‘deliberative democracy’ (Ercan and Dryzek 2015). As one Remain supporter told me,

it was like watching the country undergo a nervous breakdown, or a slow-motion train crash.

The referendum redefined British politics, turned the UK political system inside out, divided the country from top to bottom, created new ideological divisions and social identities and split whole families and communities into rival 'Leave' and 'Remain' camps. That includes my own family. My brother-in-law stood as a parliamentary candidate for the right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP). We barely speak now. Even my mother coyly admitted having voted for Brexit. When I asked why she explained (bizarrely) that it was because 'the EU had behaved so badly to the Greeks'. The divisions the referendum produced have not gone away. Indeed, Brexit may even become the catalyst for the break-up of the United Kingdom should the Scottish Nationalist Party obtain its goal for a new Scottish independence referendum.

As a subject of analysis, Brexit has been forensically scrutinised by economists, social scientists, feature writers, public intellectuals, political pundits and every kind of constitutional expert and media specialist. What therefore remains to be said about Brexit, and what can anthropology bring to these debates that is new or different? To echo Jeanette Edwards (2019), Brexit provides an ethnographic window for exploring the social and economic fault lines and ruptures within Britain today, but it also offers a lens for examining wider tensions in the EU and problems with its project for European integration. As Wilson (2020: 8–9) notes, Brexit has become an important symbol for other member states, 'one associated with economic hardship, austerity, national sovereignty, and centralised political authority and control', not to mention growing Euroscepticism and opposition to Europeanisation.

Before I turn to explore those fault lines and tensions, it is customary in anthropology to set out one's own positionality, particularly on such issues of wide public interest. I am a British-born political anthropologist but also a New Zealander who has lived and worked in Auckland for 15 years. I returned to the UK in 2016 just before the referendum – coincidentally, to conduct fieldwork for a book about *The Crown and Constitutional Reform* (Shore and Williams 2019). I therefore experienced the referendum debates first-hand. Being British and English technically makes me a 'native anthropologist' in Kirin Narayan's (1993) sense of the term, or more precisely a 'halfie anthropologist', although as Lila Abu Lughod (1991:141) says, 'For 'halfies', the other is in certain ways always the self'. That said, 'native' is a

problematic category and being an insider does not necessarily afford any privileged insight (Bošković 2005; Tsuda 2015). I was as surprised as others by the referendum result. I did not see it coming, not even in the final weeks of the campaign when the polls showed support for Leave growing. But that highlights another interesting aspect of the referendum and the way both geographical factors and the media, particularly social media, created information ‘silos’. The algorithms used by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram ensured that information and news feeds became echo boxes that served to confirm and amplify people’s set views and opinions, rarely challenging them (see Dylko et al. 2017).

However, being a native and a long-term observer of EU politics has helped me understand some of the factors behind the ‘Leave’ vote. The reasons were complex and historical, ideological and economic and, perhaps above all, emotional. I would caution against monocausal theories that try to explain Brexit as a result of anti-European xenophobia, English exceptionalism, a fixation with borders, the triumph of fake news or demagogic populist nationalism, or imperial nostalgia.² These were all elements in the Vote Leave narrative, but other factors were also at work, including a backlash against decades of austerity, anger against the government’s austerity policies, disillusionment with Britain’s membership of the EU and a rough cost-benefit calculation of the economic advantages of remaining (Frost 2017: 55). For many, Brexit was a vote of no confidence in the political system itself (Green et al. 2016). In many respects, the EU provided a blank canvas onto which voters were invited to project their fears, fantasies and hopes for a better future. Brexit was the culmination of multiple discontents and Europe became a master symbol which, like most effective political symbols, successfully combined polyvalence (i.e. multiple forms), condensed meanings and ambiguity (Kertzer 1988). However, this nevertheless leaves unanswered the questions raised at the outset: How did it come to this? What insights can anthropology offer to help us understand and interpret the Leave vote? And what lessons does Brexit hold for scholars, politicians, policy makers and the rest of Europe?

My analysis of Brexit draws on the work of political anthropologists, particularly Jeff Maskovsky and Sophie Bjork-James’ (2020) book *Beyond Populism: Angry Politics and the Twilight of Neoliberalism*. Maskovsky and Bjork-James (2020:2) describe the current era as one of ‘angry politics’; a period shaped by ‘destructive projects of resentment’ and the ‘retrograde politics’ that have emerged in ‘the spaces

opened by neoliberalism's recent failures, faults, and retreats.' It is an era marked by growing social polarisation, loss of trust in government and contradictory appeals to expertise combined with manipulative populist invocations of 'the people', or what Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Accetti (2021) term the 'new political logic of technopopulism'.

I also draw inspiration from Kathryn Verdery's (1999) work *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*. By that I don't mean that Brexit pivoted around issues of corpses or human remains (although as John Quiggin (2012) argues, neoliberalism can be thought of as a form of 'zombie economics' where dead ideas and policies stalk the earth in search of people to feed on). Rather, it is Verdery's insights into the emotional and affective dimension of politics that are particularly instructive. As Verdery notes, standard approaches to 'the political' are far too flat and narrow. Instead of reducing politics to questions of legitimacy, authority, state-building, economic interests, path dependency and the strategic decisions of policy actors – as rational choice theory does – we should see it instead in terms of 'kinship, spirits, ancestor worship and the circulation of cultural treasures' (Verdery 1999: 26). In short, politics is about 'enchantment'; about narratives that animate and enliven people, and much of this is located in the realms of imagination, fantasy and myth. These are important considerations when we try to explain Brexit.

This article is set out in three steps. First, I will outline the political and historical context for Brexit, particularly the period from the 1970s to the present. Second, I will examine the referendum itself, the main campaign groups and their political messages. And third, I will assess anthropology's contribution to interpreting and explaining Brexit, including my own reflections.

PART ONE: Political and Historical Context

The immediate catalyst for Brexit was internal divisions within the Conservative Party. Brexit sprang from a mistake. David Cameron, one of many prime ministers whose career was wrecked by party divisions over Europe, called the referendum convinced he would settle the issue once and for all with a decisive win. He had a string of electoral successes to his name, including the general election and Scottish independence referendum, and was confident he could deliver another victory. What he failed to see, and what UKIP's leader Nigel

Farage clearly saw, was the simmering public discontent and the desire beyond London and the South-East to show the government and the ‘establishment’ that things must change. Cameron’s second mistake was his failure to include any constitutional lock in the referendum. Brexit was to be decided by a simple majority vote. Cameron was so confident of victory he dismissed requests by senior civil servants to conduct formal contingency planning in the event of a Leave vote (BBC 2016). That left the UK seriously unprepared when the Brexit result was announced.

Any history of Brexit must surely acknowledge Britain’s problematic in-out relationship with Europe, which goes back centuries before the creation of the EU. In the early 1700s Britain was celebrating having avoided becoming entangled in one continental war, yet ten years later it was in the thick of another war. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries questions about the balance of power in Europe, wars with France and involvement in continental power struggles dominated British foreign policy. The relationship between Britain and the EU has followed a similar trajectory. In 1950s Britain stood aloof as the Treaty of Rome was signed but then spent the 1960s desperately trying to join the European Economic Community (EEC) as lofty and gloomy president Charles De Gaulle, perhaps unable to forgive Britain the burden of war-time gratitude and wary of the UK’s close ties to the United States, wielded the French veto.

A defining moment came in January 1972 when Britain’s Europhile Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath signed the treaty of accession to the European Communities. At that time domestic opinion in Britain was strongly against EEC membership. However, having signed the accession treaty, Heath only then set about debating and ratifying the decision in parliament. There was no public vote on the issue. Unlike Denmark and Ireland where the treaty was ratified by a popular vote, or Norway, where it was rejected following a national referendum, in the UK the short twelve-clause accession bill was passed by a majority in parliament and, like any other treaty, affirmed through the royal prerogative. However, in 1974 the Labour Party won the general election and its leader Harold Wilson had promised to hold a referendum on EEC membership in the party’s manifesto. This was motivated by pragmatism more than principle as much of the Labour Party, including almost half of the cabinet, were opposed.

The referendum – the first ever in Britain – was held on 2 June 1975 and voters were asked: ‘Do you think the UK should stay in the

European Community (Common Market)?’ Britons were thus divided into ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ camps, as opposed to the ‘Leave’ and ‘Remain’ split that characterised the 2016 referendum. Unlike 2016 too, most British businesses firmly supported EEC membership. Commercial giants including IBM, ICI, Ford, Rolls Royce, Barclays, Rio Tinto, Imperial Tobacco, WH Smith and British Steel all campaigned for Britain to join. The 67 per cent ‘Yes’ vote included most of the UK’s sixty-eight administrative counties, regions and Northern Ireland. The ‘No’ campaign, led by prominent Labour Party leftists including Michael Foot, Tony Benn and Peter Shore,³ was supported by an unusual mix of right-wing Conservatives, Scottish Nationalists, Ulster Unionists, the major trade unions, Trotskyists and anarchists.

During the 1970s Labour was the more Eurosceptic party but its anti-common market narrative rested mostly on arguments about economics and democracy, including a rejection of the common market’s protectionist policies and concerns about ‘loss of self-government’ (Benn 1994; Shore, P. 2000). For the left, the EEC was also seen as a rich man’s club created to defend the interests of capitalism. A decade later, under Margaret Thatcher’s leadership, the Conservatives became the more Eurosceptic party. Thatcher had been a strong advocate of Britain’s EEC membership but aware of the high price for joining that Edward Heath had conceded to, demanded and won the much-resented ‘British rebate’. (After those talks, France’s President Francois Mitterrand described her as having the ‘eyes of Caligula and the mouth of Marilyn Monroe’.) Uncomfortable about EU plans for a common foreign and security policy, single currency and common immigration policy, Mrs Thatcher expressed growing concerns about the EU evolving into a federal state and the loss of national sovereignty that would entail. She also took particular dislike to European Commission President Jacques Delors after he told the Trades Union Congress in September 1988 that Britain’s labour movement should embrace a ‘uniquely European model of society’ and that the commission was building a ‘platform of guaranteed social rights’ that would strengthen the power of the unions. Her response came twelve days later in a speech to the College de Bruges. Thatcher declared, ‘We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain only to see them re-imposed at a European level’.

That speech played a crucially important role in galvanising opposition to the EU project. Later in the House of Commons she delivered a blistering attack on the Commission’s vision for European integration:

Commission president Mr Delors said at a press conference the other day that he wanted the *European* Parliament to be the democratic body of the community; he wanted the Commission to be the executive and he wanted the Council of Ministers to be the Senate. No, no, no. (BBC 1990)

Two years later Mrs Thatcher was forced to resign and was replaced by John Major. But the EU *was* changing. The 1993 Treaty on European Union (or Maastricht Treaty) began the process of transferring powers from the member states to centralised institutions in Brussels and paving the way for the single currency. Enlargement brought the former Eastern European Communist states into the EU, which now had its own logo, flag, anthem and soon-to-be citizenship (Shore, C. 2000). Euroscepticism was growing in large parts of the UK and while the idea of the EU evolving towards a federal European state was quite uncontroversial in many parts of Europe, in Britain it was widely seen as a threat to national sovereignty and the UK's status as an independent state. That narrative never really changed.

In 2011 David Cameron became the first UK prime minister to veto an EU treaty. This was an opportunistic move as the treaty was aimed at salvaging the single currency and did not affect the UK. However, support for UKIP and its hard-line stance against the EU was growing and Cameron wanted to demonstrate a tougher stance towards Europe. He later promised to renegotiate Britain's EU membership if his party won the next general election. After winning that election in 2015, he set to work renegotiating the UK–EU relationship, including changes in migrant welfare payments, financial safeguards and easier ways for Britain to block EU regulations. In February 2016, he announced the results of those negotiations, and set 23 June as the promised referendum date.

PART TWO: The Referendum Campaign

Vote Leave was a cross-party group founded in 2015 by political strategists Matthew Elliot and Dominic Cummings. Elliot had previously founded the right-wing 'Taxpayers' Alliance' and the 'Conservative Friends of Russia',⁴ while Cummings had been Head of Research at 'Business for Sterling' and later served as Prime Minister Boris Johnson's chief advisor. Other members of the Vote Leave coalition included Conservatives for Britain, the Bruges Group, the European Research Group (chaired by Jacob Reece-Mogg), Business for

Britain, and a few veteran Labour MPs including Gisela Steward, Kate Hooghey and Frank Field. Vote Leave refused to allow Nigel Farage any part in their official campaign as his politics were considered too toxic, yet in private a number of Vote Leave activists worked with him.

Vote Remain was led by 'Britain Stronger in Europe', a cross-party advocacy group founded in 2015 and chaired by Sir Stuart Rose, former executive chairman of Marks and Spencer and online retailer Ocado. It drew support from various groups including the European Movement, the Young European Movement, Healthier IN Europe, Academics for Europe, Scientists for EU and Labour In For Britain. David Cameron spearheaded the Conservative Party's remain campaign, while former Labour Party Home Secretary Alan Johnson led the 'Labour In for Britain' group. By contrast, Labour's leader Jeremy Corbin, a life-long critic of the EU, could barely bring himself to articulate support for Britain's EU membership and was even accused by senior Labour members of trying to 'weaken and sabotage' the campaign (Kuenssberg 2016). After the referendum seventy-one Labour MPs signed a statement calling for a second referendum (or 'People's vote'), but this too was dismissed by Corbin, who called instead for a motion of no-confidence in the government.

Vote Leave's main campaign messages pivoted around two themes: sovereignty and immigration. On the day of the referendum an Ashcroft poll conducted among 12,369 voters found that 'Nearly half (49%) of Leave voters said the biggest single reason for wanting to leave the EU was because of 'the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK' (Ashcroft 2016). One third (33%) said the main reason was that leaving 'offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders'. This was despite the fact that most migration to Britain was from outside the EU, and therefore entirely under the control of UK authorities. Significantly, the poll also found that among Remain supporters the main reasons given for voting were economic security, jobs and prices, while only one in ten (9%) said it was because of 'a strong attachment to the EU and its shared history, culture and traditions' (Ashcroft 2016).

These themes were epitomised by Vote Leave's core message of 'Take Back Control', a powerful slogan that also echoed the narratives of regaining lost sovereignty while appealing to anti-EU nativism. During the campaign, Michael Gove, who was at that time Lord Chancellor, struck a particularly influential note delivering a populist soundbite that gained widespread currency: 'I think the people of this

country have had enough of experts with organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong' (Gove 2016). Promoting mistrust and discrediting experts or scientific fact in order to advance a particular agenda – be it in the field of economics, health or climate change – epitomised the politics of 'technopopulism' (Bickerton and Accetti 2021), echoing Donald Trump's strategy of dismissing inconvenient facts as 'fake news'. Gove trivialised the economic arguments of Remainers (dubbed 'Remainians' and 'Remoaners') as 'scaremongering' and 'project fear'. Leave campaigners also denounced the EU as a remote, unaccountable bureaucracy and argued that monies paid to Europe could be better spent on domestic needs such as health and social services.

By contrast, Vote Remain's campaign messages appeared less inflammatory yet somewhat anodyne, focusing mainly on the economic threats posed by Brexit. They too relied on bumper-sticker slogans such as 'Better Off In', 'Britain Stronger in Europe' and 'Better Together', yet their messaging was often drowned out in the public arena, particularly in Labour Party-supporting areas where many voters were unaware that Remain was Labour's official position.

A campaign low arrived in June 2016 when Nigel Farage unveiled a UKIP poster showing thousands of refugees on the march in Europe. The words 'BREAKING POINT' were emblazoned across the picture, above a line that read: 'We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders'. It didn't matter that the picture showed desperate refugees fleeing war in the Middle East, that this was the Croatia–Slovenia border, or that even Michael Gove denounced it as 'entirely inappropriate' while former Chancellor George Osborne compared it to 1930s fascist propaganda (Wright 2016): Farage's aim was to make the link in voters' minds between the refugee crisis in mainland Europe and uncontrolled immigration, and in this he succeeded.

The Referendum Results

The referendum passed by a narrow 51.9% to 48.1% margin. Voter turnout was extremely high (71.8%) – much higher than any general election – with more than 30 million people voting, but there were stark differences in voting patterns, which reflected both geographical and generational divisions. England and Wales returned majorities for Brexit by 53% to 47% while Scotland and Northern Ireland

both backed remain by 62% to 38% and 55.8% to 44.2% respectively. It has often been remarked that young people did not vote, yet as Michael Bruter and Sarah Harrison's (2017) research found, turnout among 18–24 year olds was actually 64%, of which 70% voted Remain, while 90% of over 65s voted, only 40% of whom voted Remain. Several studies found a correlation between higher levels of education and voting 'Remain' and the converse. Other polls found that university graduates voted by around three to one in favour of Remain, whereas nearly four in five of those with no educational qualifications voted 'Leave' (Curtice 2017). Like Trump voters in the US, the demographic from which Leave drew its core support seemed to be older, white, socially conservative voters in more economically marginal neighbourhoods. However, this was not the only constituency that supported Leave.

Following the announcement of the result, Leave supporters (and much of the British press) were jubilant, but among Remain supporters there was a profound sense of shock and incredulity followed by deep feelings of grief and loss. For many Scottish Remain voters, as David Knight (2017: 237–238) illustrates, that shock was experienced as a kind of 'temporal vertigo' and a sense that the cosmopolitanism that Europe represented had been 'thrown into suspension'. Most world leaders who commented publicly on the outcome, with the exception of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, expressed misgivings and concerns and warned about the dangers of populism for Europe. Opinion polls carried out among EU nationals just before the referendum found that most thought Brexit would be a 'bad thing' for both the EU and the UK. Barely hours after the referendum result had been declared, Google reported a massive surge in internet searches about the EU. Significantly, and arguably a strong indication that people had not quite grasped what they had voted for, the two most asked questions were 'What happens if we leave the EU?' and 'What is the EU?' (Fung 2016). Over the following days, as Karen Sykes (2016) noted, many people who voted for Brexit said they had not thought the election result would actually lead to Brexit.

Fallout from the result came quickly. David Cameron resigned as prime minister and leader of the Conservative Party and stepped away from the public arena; Michael Gove turned on his former ally, Boris Johnson, and both seemed to cancel each other out so that neither put themselves forward as candidates for the leadership. That role therefore fell to former Home Secretary Theresa May, who succeeded Cameron as prime minister. May had voted Remain but was

never seen as much of an EU enthusiast. Her time as leader was relatively short lived as she struggled and failed to get her Brexit deal approved by parliament. In March 2017 businesswoman Gina Miller challenged the legality of the prime minister's right to trigger Article 50, which would sanction the UK's exit from the EU, arguing that this was a matter for the people or parliament to decide. When Britain's High Court judges agreed to hear her case, one pro-Brexit newspaper (the *Daily Mail*) put their pictures on the front page with the headline 'Enemies of the People'. As many informants told me, the political atmosphere in Britain post-Brexit was even more toxic than during the campaign and public opinion was even more divided. On 29 March 2017, Theresa May wrote to European Council President Donald Tusk giving notice of Britain's intent to leave the EU, officially starting the twenty-four-month countdown to Britain's EU departure (Brusenbauch Meislova 2020). However, that timeframe was effectively derailed by internal parliamentary wrangling, as was May's leadership.

The main stumbling blocks in the Brexit negotiations were (1) money (how much the UK owed the EU as part of the 'divorce bill'); (2) what would happen to the Northern Ireland border; and (3) what would happen to UK citizens living elsewhere in the EU and EU citizens living in the UK. The UK wanted to talk about future trade relations and have a two-year transition period to smooth the way to post-Brexit relations, but the EU refused to discuss the future until progress has been made on the other issues. Somewhat out of desperation, Theresa May went to a Brussels summit to persuade EU leaders to agree to talks about the future, but things were going badly. For the first time, politicians started to speak of a 'no deal' Brexit as a distinct possibility. Previously most analysts considered 'no deal' as just a negotiation gambling ploy, assuming that no sensible leader would leave the single market and customs union without a deal and have to revert to World Trade Organization (WTO) rules.

During this period Leavers and Remainers both organised public rallies. On Saturday 23 March Nigel Farage joined some two hundred demonstrators for the Nottinghamshire leg of the pro-Brexit 'Leave Means Leave' march under the banner of 'Brexit Betrayal', while in London over one million people turned out for a mass rally calling for a People's Referendum on the Brexit deal. Meanwhile, Theresa May's new Brexit deal was again lost on amendment in the House of Commons forcing her to request a further extension to the Brexit process, which EU ambassadors agreed until 31 January 2020. Failure

to get parliamentary approval for her Brexit agreement led to May's resignation and replacement by Boris Johnson, who subsequently won a landslide eighty-seat majority in the 12 December general election. Johnson reaffirmed his commitment to 'get Brexit done' within the new timeframe and on 23 January 2020, the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act received Royal Assent. At 11pm Central European Time on 31 January 2020, the UK formally left the EU and entered a transition period. A trade deal between the UK and the EU was eventually concluded on 24 December 2020 and one week later the UK formally left the EU, the single market and the customs union.

PART 3: INTERPRETING BREXIT

Anthropological Insights

Shortly after the referendum, Sarah Green (2016) curated a collection of twenty-four essays by social anthropologists under the heading 'First Reactions'. In her introduction she recalls Alexei Yurchak's (2006) book, *Everything Was Forever, Until it Was No More* where Yurchak describes the feeling of many Russians when the Soviet Union broke up: it came as a complete shock because they thought it would never happen; but once it had happened, it was not really a surprise at all because the clues were all there. With hindsight, the Brexit result was not so surprising, but what were those clues?

One was the referendum itself and the way it was framed. Madeleine Reeves (2016) poses the interesting question, 'what is a referendum, anthropologically speaking?' Her answer is a device for 'reducing complexity to a singular decision' and a technology for 'cutting the network' in the sense that it excluded 700,000 UK citizens who were long-term EU residents from being 'The People'. It also excluded some 3.3 million EU (non-UK) citizens resident in the UK, which as Adrian Low (2017) argues, should have been classed as a violation of Article 14 of the UK Human Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of national origin.

As a political technology, the referendum worked very effectively to give voters a fleeting sense of control: the message was 'You decide: You choose'. The problem was that the choices on offer were unclear. As Reeves (2016: 479) noted:

To an electorate schooled in the convoluted first-past-the-post system of representative government there was something intoxicating about the

referendum's simplicity and its violence. For a fleeting moment, The People really were sovereign.

One reason for that sense of empowerment perhaps relates to the language and semantics of Brexit. 'Take back control' and 'Leave' were far more powerful, declarative and proactive campaign messages compared to those of 'Better off in' and 'Remain'. As a verb 'remain' has largely passive connotations that include 'to stay in the same place', 'endure', 'persist', 'carry on' and 'continue unchanged.' Its synonyms include 'hold on', 'hover', 'linger', 'wait', 'carry on', 'stand' and 'stop'. Remain also evokes the idea of being left behind, fighting a rear-guard action and enduring. By contrast, 'leave' implies action, movement and stepping forward. Its main synonyms are 'separate', 'reject', 'part company', 'take off', 'go away', 'escape', 'fly', 'move' and 'start'. While leave can also have pejorative meanings (e.g. 'quit', 'surrender', 'abandon' and 'leave behind') it usually implies agency and movement in contrast to the inertness associated with the term 'remain'.

Unlike the 1975 referendum, which asked people simply to vote 'Yes' or 'No' to EEC membership, the 2016 referendum thus created a more complex and symbolically loaded dualism that helped to forge stronger and more lasting distinctions between Leaver and Remainer identities. In this respect and in terms of winning the hearts and minds of voters, the Vote Remain campaign was disadvantaged from the outset.

Austerity, Disillusionment and Misinformation

Semantics aside, three other factors played a particularly central role in determining the referendum outcome. The first of these was the preceding decade of austerity ushered in by David Cameron's Conservative government. This had produced a precipitous drop in living standards and stagnating wages, which provided fertile ground for the rising tide of nationalist populism. Many working-class voters, particularly those living in Britain's more deprived housing estates, saw their living standards fall and they felt alienated and abandoned by an indifferent 'Kafkaesque welfare bureaucracy' (Gusterson 2017: 211) and a government more concerned with pushing its controversial 'Bedroom Tax', 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 (see Evans 2017; Koch 2017; Powell 2017). It is hardly surprising

that those who felt left behind were so receptive to the 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 enchantingly simplistic appeal that seemed to echo the loss of control over their own lives. Despite claims to the contrary, the era of austerity has not ended; it has simply become institutionalised and normalised (Blyth 2013; Koch 2018).

But austerity also brought to the surface a harm that was already there, emerging from what political philosopher Charles Taylor identified as the consequences for people’s identity that arises from the absence of recognition. As Taylor (1994:26) describes it, this can saddle its victims with ‘a crippling self-hatred’, not to mention hatred of others:

a person or group can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (Taylor 1994: 25)

Parallels can be drawn here with Donald Trump’s election victory in 2016. Brexit and Trump were both symptoms of a new nationalist populism sweeping across Western Europe and the US and much like the US where Hillary Clinton described Trump supporters as a ‘basket of deplorables’ characterised by ‘racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic’ views (Jacobs 2016), Brexit supporters were also vilified as narrow-minded, ignorant, xenophobes. As Hugh Gusterson (2017: 211) observes, such dismissal of the post-industrial working class and people from the rural hinterlands by condescending cosmopolitan elites was a form of ‘domestic orientalism’, which would have contributed to their sense of oppression and misrecognition. Insa Koch identified similar patterns in her fieldwork study of a south-east London housing estate pseudonymously called Park End. One Park End resident who voted Leave was Trisha, a mother of two mixed white and Afro-Caribbean children. The day after the vote she posted on social media:

Am I a racist? No! Did I vote out? Yes! Am I ignorant? No! Did I do some research? Yes! Have I watched hours and hours of debates? Yes! It’s my opinion and my vote! (Koch 2017: 220)

It would be misleading, however, to portray Brexit and Trump supporters as exclusively alienated, uneducated, downwardly mobile and poor. As Gusterson notes, the mainstream media’s ‘blue collar’

narrative to explain why post-industrial white working-class voters turned to Trump and Brexit oversimplifies the relationship between neoliberalism and populist nationalism. Citing data from Christine Walley (2017) he notes that ‘those who voted for him [Trump] earned each year an average of \$72,000, well above the US median yearly income of \$56,000’ (Gusterson 2017: 210; Walley 2017: 232). While those from Britain’s poorest households were much more likely to support leaving the EU, the Leave coalition included supporters from wealthier backgrounds as well as those with vested business interests who harboured visions of the UK as an entrepreneurial, offshore, buccaneering, regulation-free country striking out alone on a post-EU path. Yet the messages of Trump and Farage did appeal particularly to alienated post-industrial working class voters and provided a focus for their grievances, creating a moral crisis around immigration that ‘destabilised the authority of the government’ (Evans 2020: 559). Significantly too, both Trump and Farage successfully portrayed themselves as ordinary ‘men of the people’, yet both came from highly wealthy, privileged and elite backgrounds.

The second key factor was disillusionment, not just with the government but with the political system itself. If Charles Taylor is correct that ‘misrecognition’ saddles its victims with a crippling self-hatred, it also saddles its victims with a self-destructive anger. Most Vote Leave supporters that I encountered wanted to hit out against a political establishment that they felt had abandoned them. Many didn’t care about the economic risks. For example, I asked a Leave supporter ‘don’t you want your children to be able to travel and work freely in twenty-seven other European countries?’ His reply was ‘most people in Britain can’t even afford to travel up to London, let alone around Europe’.

The third key factor was the role of (mis)information. During the referendum campaign statistics were weaponised. One important example of this was Vote Leave’s claim that EU membership was costing Britain £350 million a week, monies which could be spent on the National Health Service (NHS). After the referendum Vote Leave admitted its sums were incorrect, but by then its work had been done. Remainers claimed that the referendum was won through lies, political manipulation and money but how important was political interference? Certainly, large sums of money were spent to influence the result and between 1 February and 23 June alone Vote Leave received £24.4 million in donations and loans, some 15 million of which came from five of the nation’s richest businessmen including the millionaire Arron Banks (chief executive of Southern Rock Insurance), James

Hoskins, (co-owner of Crystal Palace Football Club), and Tim Martin (owner of the Weatherspoon's pub chain). There were also allegations (some of them true) of Russian interference via bots and false Facebook accounts and interference by Cambridge Analytica, an IT company that mined Facebook data from millions of people to create complex psychographic profiles in order to deliver pinpointed adverts to them and propel them into new behaviour patterns. As the former business development director for Cambridge Analytica stated:

If we targeted enough persuadable people in the right precincts, then those states would turn red instead of blue. . . . We bombarded them through blogs, websites, articles, videos on every platform you can imagine until they saw the world the way we wanted them to – until they voted for our candidate. (Kaiser 2016, cited in Clark 2020)

Cambridge Analytica's influence on the referendum is still a matter of debate,⁵ but its involvement in the harvesting and commercialisation of personal data for those seeking to steer voter behaviour highlights a worrying trend in the way technopopulist strategies are contributing to what Colin Crouch (2004:4) termed 'post-democracy' in which public electoral debate become a 'tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professional experts in the techniques of persuasion' while 'citizens play an increasingly passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them'.

Conclusion: Lessons from Brexit

One question often asked by anthropologists and social scientists as well as policy professionals and media analysts is why were Brexit and Trump such a surprise? One reason was because the groups that supported Brexit and Trump are little studied by anthropologists or other fieldworkers. We prefer to study marginal and more progressive groups such as Zapatista rebels, indigenous activists and Occupy Wall Street protesters. As Gusterson (2017: 212) says, if we want to understand why 'their sense of grievance makes them tinder for nationalist populist movements, that is a problem'. Perhaps that anger could have been channelled towards more progressive causes.

Returning to Katherine Verdery, one of the lessons of Brexit is its reminder that politics is not simply about rational choice, economic interests, statecraft and policy actors following institutional pathways: it is about emotion and affect, irrational impulses and enchantment,

or in this case, *dis*-enchantment. Brexit arose from a perfect storm of discontent fuelled by angry politics. Vote Leave were better at capitalising on those resentments and made the more compelling case. They were also better at enchanting voters and tapping into their hopes and fears. Anthropologists and other analysts will need to look more closely at the imaginaries that were attached to votes and how these are grounded in specific life experiences if we are to better understand ‘the grassroot reality of the places we call home’ (Knight 2017: 240).

It is too early to assess the impact of Brexit on the UK and the European Union and in Britain public opinion seems to have moved from shock to resignation and a sense of ‘let’s just get on with it’. Boris Johnson has spoken enthusiastically about a new ‘Global Britain’ freed from the constraints of EU regulations, striking up new bilateral trade deals and England becoming ‘Singapore-upon-Thames’, yet few significant trade deals have been negotiated. Despite this, and widespread acknowledgement that many of Vote Leave pre-referendum promises were untrue, the UK remains just as divided in 2021 as it had been in 2016. An opinion poll conducted in April 2021 found that while just six per cent of Remain voters had changed their minds and now said that Brexit was right, almost 11 per cent of Leave voters said they regretted the result. However, the poll found that for the first time in three years the pro-Brexit stand had taken the lead by 46–43% (with the remaining 11 per cent undecided). Many analysts attributed this growth in support for Brexit to the row between the European Commission and the UK over the EU’s procurement of the AstraZeneca vaccine (Kellner 2021).

In terms of Brexit’s effect on support for EU membership in other EU countries, the European Parliament elections of May 2019 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 declared, Brexit acted like a ‘vaccine’ against populist anti-EU claims and Europeans were cleaving to the EU because they saw what was happening in the UK and realised the costs of leaving (Barker and Toplensky 2019). Significantly, this was

the first European elections where voting actually increased, reversing a forty-year decline. However, for many voters the benefits of remaining are not as clear as Tusk would like to believe.

For Tusk and other EU leaders, Brexit was one of the most spectacular mistakes in the history of the EU. For the UK, it is arguably the greatest foreign policy disaster since King George III lost the American colonies and triggered the war of independence in 1775. It has certainly inflicted a major blow to the economy (much of which has been hidden by the Covid-19 crisis), isolating the UK politically and weakening it diplomatically. But Brexit is a wake-up call for the rest of Europe too. As Brian, one of the British council estate residents interviewed by Koch (2017: 288) states: 'Democracy means nothing when you are uneducated and poor'. Brexit was a message by the forgotten people of Britain expressing a need to be heard; 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' (Green 2016: 483).

The conditions that produced Brexit are not confined to the UK. Anthropologists who work in the Balkans have highlighted important parallels in the way the ideologies and practices that led to 'exititis' and the unravelling of the former Yugoslav Federation are also evident in the EU (Hayden 2020). The challenge for Europe's mainstream parties will be to convince those people they are being listened to and that democracy – and the liberal institutions and values that sustain it – are worth defending against the onslaught of right-wing populist nationalists. Yet as many EU analysts have argued, decisions in the EU continue to be made 'by an elitist and technocratic organisation with a democratic deficit that binds elected governments across the continent' (Frost 2017: 68). The EU was never set up to be a democratic organisation and this makes it particularly vulnerable to its critics (Shore, C. 2006; Follesdal and Hix 2006). The prevention of further departures from the EU will require serious investment in the economic and political infrastructure, starting with an end to austerity and a different kind of social contract between citizens and the state, whether that is the nation state or the EU polity. It is unfortunate that it has taken a global pandemic to get that message across.

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Notes

1. Written initially as a Keynote Lecture, this article is occasionally more informal in tone.
2. I agree with Karen Sykes's (2016) observation that Brexit was neither 'a retro-grade vote' nor was it an attempt to 'recover a lost past' and an older identity in empire.
3. A further note on positionality. Peter Shore was my father and Tony Benn, a close family friend, was my godfather. Growing up in a household with strong ties to the Labour Party meant that questions about politics and policy, particularly Britain's relationship with Europe, were regular topics of conversation.
4. Elliot also worked for City firm 'Shore Capital' owned by the Conservative Party donor Howard Shore, which has business links to the billionaire US political funders the Koch brothers.
5. The UK Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) conducted a three-year investigation into Cambridge Analytica (CA) but found no evidence that it had misused data to influence Brexit or aid Russian intervention in the vote. However, Facebook was fined £500,000 by the ICO as well as the maximum levy of \$5bn (£4bn) in the US for its leaky data practices that led to 50 million users' data being misused by CA. The Vote Leave and Leave EU campaigns were also fined for breaking rules on electoral spending limits.

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