



## Brexit: Sociological Responses

Tom Frost

To cite this article: Tom Frost (2017): Brexit: Sociological Responses, European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology, DOI: [10.1080/23254823.2017.1373917](https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1373917)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1373917>



Published online: 20 Sep 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Brexit: Sociological Responses**, edited by William Outhwaite, London, Anthem Press, 2017, 224 pp., £25, \$40 (ppk), ISBN: 9781783086450

I started reviewing *Brexit: Sociological Responses* during the campaign for the UK General Election held on 8 June 2017, where I, along with many of the chattering classes, pollsters, politicians, and a large swathe of the electorate, expected that the result of the 'Brexit election' would be a large Conservative victory, if not a landslide. I had paused completing this review until the election results had come in, expecting to write about the impact of a Conservative Majority Government elected on the Prime Minister's tautological slogan that 'Brexit means Brexit'. When the Exit Poll was released at 10 pm on the evening of 8 June, my immediate reaction was that it was wrong. It predicted, in the face of weeks and months of opinion polling and predictions, that there would be a Hung Parliament, with losses for the governing Conservative Party and a relatively large number of gains for the Labour Party opposition. I had been campaigning non-stop for the past seven weeks in my own very marginal Labour-held constituency for the Remain-supporting sitting MP; the exit poll and its implications appeared markedly different from what I had experienced (or perhaps read too much into) on the doorstep. And yet the Exit Poll was correct, and the UK has a Hung Parliament. Far from signalling the death rattle of the Labour Party, the Conservative Party's 20-plus point lead in the opinion polls evaporated over a campaign which was run disastrously by the Prime Minister.

At the time of writing, the Conservative Party have had to stitch together a 'supply and confidence' deal with the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party, a socially conservative, pro-Brexit political party. Such an arrangement is not only politically shaky, with the potential for another General Election within months, but also could have severe repercussions for the Peace Process and Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland as well, the future of which had already come under scrutiny since the Brexit vote. The level of uncertainty surrounding 'Brexit' has only grown since the snap General Election. However, in my view this has only deepened the need for Brexit to be analysed, both in terms of its potential impacts, but also in terms of the reasons why the Leave vote was returned in the first place.

In this slim volume, William Outhwaite brings together 15 leading social scientists from across Europe to discuss the phenomenon of 'Brexit' and provide the very analysis which is needed to try and understand the lessons of the vote and the reasons for it occurring. The vote to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016 will have far-reaching implications for the polity of the UK, as well as the European Union and its remaining constituent States. As Outhwaite notes in the introduction, the consequences of Brexit were very much uncertain at the time of going to press (p. viii). Given the nature of the Brexit process, despite the invocation of Article 50 TEU in March 2017, and the

planned commencement of the Brexit negotiations in mid-June 2017, it is very likely that this uncertainty will remain up until the UK's planned exit from the EU in 2019 and beyond. This has only been exacerbated by the Hung Parliament facing the UK in 2017. However, Outhwaite and the contributors deserve great credit for compiling such a thoughtful and stimulating series of essays in a mere six weeks.

Given the uncertainty of the Brexit process, both in terms of the Article 50 'divorce' process, and the future trading relationship between the UK and the EU, and the UK and the rest of the world, it is necessarily the case that some of the contributions dealing with what is to come next in the Brexit process are more speculative than those pieces that deal with the reasons for the referendum result itself. *Brexit: Sociological Responses* is divided into three sections, which deal with the direct reasons for the referendum result itself, the underlying societal trends which may have led to the Leave vote but which will continue to shape the UK's society in the future, and the future uncertainties the UK will face after the vote. This book should be seen as an important contribution to sociological and political research and debate on the 'Brexit phenomenon', and I very much hope that this is the catalyst for much deeper and profound analysis of Brexit than has been shown in political circles over the past year.

### How did it happen?

The first section of the volume, 'How did it Happen?', includes contributions from scholars who assess the reasons why the Leave vote was narrowly returned in June 2016. These contributions detail the recent (in historical terms) political and societal reasons for the result, both in the UK and Europe more broadly. Three of the four chapters in the first section focus on the idiosyncrasies of how 'Europe' and the politics of the European Union have clashed with the trends and themes of UK politics since the Second World War.

The first of these three complementary chapters is written by Martin Westlake. In 'The Inevitability of *That* Referendum', Westlake traces the referendum of 2016 through the prism of the position of referenda in British politics since World War Two. Decried by Clement Attlee as 'a device so alien to all our traditions ... which has too often been the instrument of Nazism and Fascism' (quoted in Bogdanor, 1981, p. 35), referenda have become more and more a part of the political system in the UK in recent years. Westlake is correct to point out the irony that the 2016 referendum was only called as a result of British people's ambiguity and reticence with respect to their relationship to Europe. If the UK had joined the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950, or signed up to the Treaty of Rome in 1957, or had their 1961 application to join the EEC accepted, then the referendum might still have remained an 'alien device' to the UK's political order (p. 3). Westlake traces the growth of a populist anti-Common Market politics throughout the 1960s that led to Harold Wilson's Labour Party seeking to both win power and unify his Party's warring factions by calling for what would become the 1975 referendum on accession to the EEC (pp. 4–5). The importance of the 1975 referendum, for Westlake, is that it

established not just the principle that referenda would be held in the UK, but also that the result of such consultative referenda would be implemented, and led to 'Europe' becoming an issue for regular Parliamentary rebellions over the past forty years (p. 6). This led to the situation whereby in the 2015 General Election, due to Europe becoming such a key political issue, all three main UK political parties had offered the electorate a referendum on EU membership, albeit in different situations (p. 10). Westlake's conclusion is that the 'long view' of the UK's membership in the EU, with the issue of Europe becoming more and more a matter for day-to-day political point scoring and short-term gains, had led to an inevitable second referendum on EU membership.

Complementing Westlake's analysis and argument, John Holmwood's chapter, 'Exit from the Perspective of Entry', considers how the EU (and before it, the EC and EEC) has shaped UK party politics and government policy since the UK joined in the 1970s (p. 31). Holmwood, in a manner echoing Westlake's 'long view' of the UK's membership of the EU, argues that the debate over Brexit is framed in the same way as the debate over 'Europe' at the moment of entry – namely, in a post-imperial society, how does the UK achieve an inclusive political economy whilst ensuring transnational cooperation (p. 32)? Stefan Auer, by contrast, focuses his attention not on domestic British politics but on how the politics of the European Union led to the Leave vote. In 'Brexit, Sovereignty and the End of an Ever Closer Union', Auer looks at the EU's federalist impulses through its championing of the concept of an 'ever closer union'. Auer convincingly argues that the EU should have revisited the idea of promoting an 'ever closer union' after the financial crisis struck in 2008 (p. 42). To promote federalism and internationalism at this time was detrimental to both the Union's future as a whole and Britain's place in that Union. Rather, Auer notes (drawing upon the thought of Quentin Skinner) that this promotion of federalism effaced the continued importance of national sovereignty today (pp. 42–44). Viewing the German 'open borders' policy towards refugees as impacting the result of the UK's referendum (pp. 46–48), Auer argues that attempting to bury sovereignty may well end up burying democracy itself (p. 49). Instead, Auer argues that Brexit should be seen as a new beginning for the UK *and* for Europe. The EU currently has a 'sovereignty paradox' which for Auer can no longer be ignored – Member States have ceded too much control for them to be able to set effective policies in important areas in a way that is independent of each other, but they also retain enough initiative to resist compromise and thwart common-sense solutions on this issue (pp. 50–51).

The final contribution to the first section of the book is Jonathan Hearn's 'Vox Populi'. I view this chapter as providing a bridge between the first and second sections of the volume. Hearn attempts to understand the Leave vote through the prisms of globalisation, nationalism, and where people believe the balance of power in society lies (p. 19). Drawing on the opinion polling of the Leave voters to try to understand their view of the UK in the early twenty-first century, Hearn concludes that the electors who voted Leave had a negative view of the effects of globalisation on the UK, and felt as though the UK and its political system did not work for them (pp. 27–28). On this reading, the EU

question became a conduit for these views and concerns. Hearn does not seek to underplay the concerns of the Leave voters. Rather, he offers two tentative observations from Brexit. First, British party politics needs electoral reform, through something akin to proportional representation, to allow for the expression of divergent and conflicting interests in the political sphere. Second, UK politics needs to deal seriously with the critique of elitism that underpinned the Leave vote (p. 29). Through reading Hearn's chapter, we are introduced to the next section, which interrogates the underlying sociological issues in British society that fed into the contemporary issues that led to Brexit.

### **The politics of Brexit**

The second section, 'The Politics of Brexit', attempts to critically engage with the political and societal trends and circumstances in the UK which may have contributed to the Leave vote. Many of these contributors focus upon issues which need to be examined and tackled in British society, not just as the Brexit negotiations take place but also in the years and decades to follow. Contributions in this section fall into three categories.

Chris Thornhill, an academic lawyer, provides a fascinating look at the legal and constitutional issues both in the EU and UK. Thornhill, in 'A Tale of Two Constitutions', looks at the legitimacy of the EU (pp. 77–78). Thornhill contends that the background to the EU referendum lies in two overlapping diagnoses of constitutional crisis – one focused on the EU and one on the UK and its future (p. 84). Both constitutions have been gradually constructed historically. And both, for Thornhill, have been plagued by a search for a 'cure' in the image of an external sovereign democratic people, be they British or European or otherwise (p. 84). Rather than posing any solution to this conundrum, Thornhill's chapter challenges the reader to think critically about the basis for the EU and UK's constitutional authority and legitimacy, without falling back on simplistic notions of a 'people'.

Craig Calhoun, Colin Crouch, and Gerard Delanty, in their three chapters, analyse in different ways how the latent issues of nationalism and multiculturalism have shaped both British society and the Brexit vote. Each sees the referendum encapsulating forces of nationalism rebelling against the internationalism embodied by the EU. Crucially, however, none of the writers sinks into hackneyed stereotypes of 'little England'. Rather, each interrogates how the Leave vote brought to the fore deep-seated societal conflicts, and what (if anything) can be done about them now. Colin Crouch, in 'Globalization, Nationalism and the Changing Axes of Political Identity', traces the clash between traditional national identities and multiculturalism and globalisation. The political cleavage between these competing forces could mean that nationalism could be set to trump all other political forces (p. 104). In a similar vein, Craig Calhoun, in 'Populism, Nationalism and Brexit', considers the Leave vote to be England's vote, driven by frustration and nostalgia and a long-suppressed nationalism, especially amongst the white working class (p. 61). Specifically, Calhoun argues that London and its privileged position in the UK's economy was rebelled against

(p. 67). Even though Calhoun sees Brexit as a rebellion against cosmopolitanism, he does not see populism and nationalism as necessarily 'bad'. Instead, they are intellectually labile and available to be steered, as they were by the populist Right (p. 73). Frustrations with global economic trends are mixed with cultural and security concerns and a sense of not being taken seriously by national elites (p. 72). For Calhoun, the 'masses' are frustrated with the failure of previous elites to give them the respect and opportunities they desired (p. 73). Finally, Gerard Delanty, in 'A Divided Nation in a Divided Europe', argues that Brexit is the expression of new societal cleavages that have been amplified by British-specific factors and English nationalism (p. 112). For Delanty, Brexit is an expression of divided societies – between those who have benefitted from globalisation and those who have not benefitted from it (p. 114). What Brexit has done is drawn out a deep societal division that derives from divergent cultural processes and changing lifeworlds (p. 118). Delanty argues that the UK needs to overcome this cleavage – democracy for him needs saving from the populist Right. Cosmopolitans must put forward alternative arguments for the future of Europe (p. 122).

There is one other chapter in this section, which I found by far the most interesting and thought-provoking of the entire volume (which is a sentiment meant as high praise, given the quality of all the chapters). This chapter is Gurinder K Bhambra's, which focuses on issues of race and migration. Bhambra reads the EU referendum as a proxy for these issues. In 'Locating Brexit in the Pragmatics of Race, Citizenship and Empire', Bhambra sees the referendum as acting as a discussion on who belonged and had rights in the UK and who did not. For Bhambra, political citizenship is racialised, and accounts of inequality today need to appreciate how the UK is deeply structured by race. Bhambra supports this hypothesis through constructing an argument looking at the history of the British Empire and the role of immigration in Empire as well. Bhambra notes that there has never been an independent 'Britain' (p. 92). Since 1707, Great Britain has existed as a part of other broader political entities (the EU, the Commonwealth, and the British Empire). Therefore, Bhambra contends that what it is to be 'British' cannot be understood separately from Empire or the imperial modes of governance in the twentieth century (p. 92). Indeed, British citizenship was only considered separately from a status common to citizens of all colonies and the UK in 1981. The British Empire was a zone of free movement. Immigration restrictions were only passed in the UK when the darker-skinned peoples of Empire exercised their rights to free movement (p. 95) (the 'post-War migrants' epitomised by the Empire Windrush in 1948 were actually all British citizens). 'British' citizenship (which, given the focus on British nationalism during the referendum, is a key term) emerged in opposition to 'darker' aliens from the Commonwealth. As Bhambra correctly points out, in 1961 the white foreign-born population was 10 times the size of the 'coloured' population, the majority of whom would have been citizens (p. 96).

As such, Bhambra's chapter ties together many of the themes and concerns which had been drawn out throughout the first two sections of the book. It is only through looking again at our understandings of Britishness, and

understanding how British and English identity has been created and reinforced, that scholars will be able to understand not just the forces behind the Leave vote, but also the potential directions the UK could take over the Brexit negotiations and beyond.

### Prospects for/after Brexit

The third and final section, 'Prospects For/After Brexit', includes contributions which assess the uncertainties of Brexit both for the UK as well as for the EU. As with any commentary on fast-moving events, many of these contributions have already been overtaken by outside events. Indeed, the consequences of the June 2017 General Election could have any number of impacts on the Brexit process. Tim Oliver, in 'The EU and Brexit: Processes, Perspectives and Prospects', looks at how Brexit will unfold, and how it is shaping debates in the UK and EU about both their futures. In addition, Oliver looks at the factors – ideas, institutions, and individuals – that could lead to a 'soft Brexit' or a 'hard Brexit', and considers the prospects of both. Oliver's chapter is an excellent summary of the potential directions Brexit could take. These directions are unclear to me writing many months after Oliver, and will doubtless unfold in surprising directions as well.

However, it is possible, even given the uncertainty, to discern some key issues both for the Brexit negotiations, and for future political debates in the UK. Antje Wiener in 'The Impossibility of Disentangling Integration' looks at the mid- to long-term effects of Brexit, focusing on 'contestations' about fundamental norms in the surrounding Brexit debate (p. 139). Wiener identifies two fundamental contestations: first, whether free-movement principles should apply to persons or just to workers, and second, whether sovereignty lies with Parliament or the voters (p. 145).

However, the embedded 'acquis communautaire' of the EU means that disentangling the UK cleanly from the Union will be difficult if not impossible (p. 146). Wiener is surely right to note that Brexit involves a murky and long-winded process (p. 149), and the advocates for Brexit have publicly (at least) underestimated what the EU has become after five decades of integration, and how the UK has changed through its taking part in this process over four decades (p. 149).

The three remaining chapters in the third section of the book, in my view, attempt to suggest ways in which academia can respond to this murky process. Harry F. Dahms, in 'Critical Sociology, Brexit and the Vicissitudes of Political Economy in the Twenty-First Century', asks what the sociological significance of Brexit is. Dahms argues that Brexit highlights the need for sociologists to revisit, re-examine, and scrutinise basic assumptions, notions, and concepts about social, political, cultural, and economic life, as well as structures that corresponded with a historically unprecedented period of social and political stability and economic prosperity (p. 185). Brexit highlights the need to confront an array of unpleasant facts about the state of modern society (p. 189), and sociologists should embrace critical theory to assist with this task (p. 190). Similarly, Simon

Susen, in 'No Exit From Brexit?' calls for a 'critical sociology of Brexit' (p. 153). Brexit is explained as a conjunction of a number of phenomena: the world problem of disillusionment with mainstream politics, the European problem of disillusionment with the practices, structures and actors of the EU, and the British problem of the reluctance of UK citizens and politicians to conceive of their EU membership as a largely positive contribution (pp. 155–157). Brexit was based on divisions. But Susen acknowledges that although perceived as a protest vote, Vote Leave ran a more positive campaign than Remain (p. 160). The referendum offered voters a binary choice, but people voted for many different and opposed reasons (pp. 160–162). Susen also looks at different 'Brexit scenarios'. The third-least likely scenario in his eyes – 'Relegitimised Hard Brexit' – is the one happening in the UK (pp. 173–174). Susen still predicts a soft Brexit or for the UK to reject Brexit (pp. 174–175). Regardless, pursuing a critical sociology of Brexit is vital whatever happens (p. 175). Finally, Adrian Favell's 'European Union Versus European Society: Sociologists on "Brexit" and the "Failure" of Europeanisation' notes that during the 'golden age' of the EU after the fall of the Berlin Wall, sociology was absent (p. 193). As the storm clouds gathered over the EU, sociology was marginal (p. 194). Favell notes that it has not been easy to do sociological work on sociological Europeanisation, but there did exist a sociology available to EU studies. Studying this literature might have revealed something about why the EU was coming apart (pp. 194–195).

## Conclusion

All of the contributors to *Brexit: Sociological Responses* should be commended for assisting in producing a book which has the potential to help shape the debates on Brexit both in sociology and across the humanities. Given the uncertainties of Brexit for the UK and the EU (and indeed the wider world), this critical sociology is needed now more than ever.

## Reference

Bogdanor, V. (1981). *The people and the party system: The referendum and electoral reform in British politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tom Frost

*Department of Law, School of Law, Politics and Sociology, University of Sussex,  
Brighton, UK*

 t.m.frost@sussex.ac.uk

© 2017 Tom Frost

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1373917>

