William Outhwaite (ed.)


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A well-attested anecdote records the question about the financial crisis posed, in November 2008, by Queen Elizabeth to the academics of the London School of Economics. ‘Why did nobody see it coming?’ (*Daily Telegraph* 5 November 2008; *The Guardian* 18 November 2008). A rather similar question – ‘however did this happen’ – may justifiably be posed to social scientists about the two major upheavals in British politics between June 2016 and June 2017: the referendum on membership of the European Union (EU) and its result, and the calling and outcome of the general election of June 2017. In an admirably prompt attempt to tackle one of these conundrums, which also throws much light on the other, William Outhwaite has edited an illuminating collection of essays by a panel of sociologists on *Brexit: sociological responses*, grouped around three approaches: explanations for the holding of the referendum, the political implications and prospects for the future. The essays prompt reflexion on a number of key themes, including theoretical frameworks, and social, political, cultural and rhetorical issues.

The process of European integration was, from its beginning in the years immediately after the Second World War, clearly distinct from other developments and processes in international relations or domestic politics. In consequence, and closely linked to empirical observation of the processes occurring, a range of theories of integration – explanatory, analytical and constructivist – evolved, giving rise to much debate (Wiener and Dietz, 2009: 5–6) but all attempting to account in retrospect for what had taken place and provide a framework for forecasting. While empirical developments both challenged and reinforced these frameworks (Saurugger, 2013: 249), most of them have in common a perception of integration as a ‘given’ (Saurugger, 2013: 250) – a one-way street. Brexit represents a profound challenge to these approaches, and it may well be that, in addition to the international relations specialists and political scientists who have dominated the field, sociologists have much to contribute to the analysis of integration in a world where national structures and attributions of meaning, while perhaps partially transformed, resiliently persist. Indeed, Auer (p. 50), drawing on Quentin Skinner, argues that such resilience is essential, since, in his view, the shared sovereignty of ever closer union...
having proved incapable of dealing with the crises of sovereign debt (e.g. in Greece) and migration, it is the national ‘political communities that make democracy work’ (p. 51). As long ago as 2009 Hooghe and Marks argued that the politics around the EU have been shaped at least as crucially by identities as by economic interests, and that what matters is whether or not those identities are exclusive, that is, do not allow for the possibility of multiple identities, for example, both British and European (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). And for powerful historical and sociological reasons, identity has been aligned around the nation state.

The utility of a sociological approach is a theme which runs as an undercurrent through many of the contributions to this book. Susen and Dahms address the implications directly. Dahms criticises the ‘liberal perspective on modern society’ (p. 188) and implies that had more attention been paid to the critical perspectives inherent in the views of the founding fathers of sociology (Marx, Durkheim and Weber) Brexit would not have come as such a shock. In the light of Hooghe and Marks’s work cited above it seems likely that, as several contributors suggest, critical sociology has failed to pay adequate attention to the formation of identity in the context of the nation state and European Integration. Susen, like Dahms, calls for a ‘critical sociology of Brexit’ (p. 178) and notes that substantial sections of the population – the marginalized, deprived and disenchanted – ‘do not hold opinions … let alone cast their vote, in accordance with what critical sociologists … would consider their real interests’ (p. 165, emphasis in original)

In pursuit of the paradox, a number of the authors concentrate on the nature of the social divisions which the Brexit vote revealed. Calhoun, Delanty and Susen all offer surveys of the cleavages which, though they can be conceptualised as part of a much broader global phenomenon (p. 114) were strongly illuminated by the Brexit vote. Delanty notes that the old class division between capital and labour has been supplemented by new ones which reflect cultural issues (p. 115). What has resulted is a society divided between those who have benefitted from globalization and those who have not. Susen’s list of divisions is exhaustive (pp. 163–165), noting, for example, the impact of wealth, employment, education, profession and generation, though, interestingly, he does not mention gender.

The political implications of these divisions also loom large throughout this volume. Calhoun fills out the notion of a divide between cosmopolitan and chauvinist by asserting that the Brexit vote was ‘not a strategic effort to secure a particular political or economic outcome’ (p. 58) but was a vote against the elites who had ‘shaped the unattractive situations in which [the voters] found themselves’, against multiculturalism, against ‘London’ and for ‘some version of the past’ (p. 60). The EU, he argues, served as a stand-in for a context from which Brexit voters could not in fact opt to exit – the political, cultural and economic dominance of London, of neoliberalism, of globalization. It is, however, important to recognize, as Colin Crouch does (p. 106) that the 48 per cent who voted against Brexit may also deeply cherish their cosmopolitanism. ‘No political family can look forward to a comfortable future’ (p. 108). That these divisions impact party political competition has arguably become more evident since the 2017 election. The volume under review was produced too soon for any of the contributors to anticipate that election, and certainly not that the British Election Study would reveal that Brexit was by far the leading concern
of their voter panel, if not of the party campaigns (http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-impact/the-brexit-election-the-2017-general-election-in-ten-charts/#.WYc6ktTyuyI consulted 6 August 2017). The relevance of much of the political analysis proposed in this book will persist, not least if one takes from it – and from the surveys by Lord Ashcroft and by the British Election Study which underlie the conclusions – that neither Labour nor the Conservatives should be drawing too much comfort from an apparent reversion to two party politics which the 2017 result seemed to suggest. If Brexit is a proxy for deeply rooted frustrations and resentments, no outcome is likely to appease them, nor will it satisfy the remainers, and new forms of political expression may well appear to embody the new cleavages.

That nostalgia may have been an element in the cognitive framework of many voters points up the cultural aspects of the Brexit vote. Much of the discussion of these focuses around the role of the Brexit vote as ‘a proxy for discussions about race and migration’ (p. 91). Gurminder Bhambra would probably find a number of her fellow contributors disagreeing with her view that this debate outweighed the discussion of the pros and cons of EU membership, but all would probably concede that migration, with an implicitly racist attitude behind it, was a key issue, and even that ‘for some … the question of leave was … more about having non-white citizens and migrants from Europe leave the UK’ (p. 38). As Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath have shown, what seemed to matter most in determining the relationship between levels of immigration and a vote for Brexit was not the total number of immigrants in any locality but the rate and speed of population change (https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities 31 August 2016 consulted 7 August 2017). The implication of discomfort at change supports the argument for the role of nostalgia as well as racism in the vote.

A sense of insecurity may in part have been due to the coincidence of the Brexit debate with the on-going tragedy of migration across the Mediterranean. The openness and multiculturalism that elites had come to take for granted were profoundly challenged by anti-immigrant and racist discourse, by ‘a deep hostility to cultural pluralism’ (p. 118) and by a scapegoating reflecting ‘a sense of eroding racial and national privilege’ (p. 59). This hostility to cultural pluralism is also apparent in the finding of the British Social Attitudes survey that 72 per cent of those they denote ‘authoritarian voters’ – those who think ‘everybody in society should acknowledge and accept a common set of social mores and cultural practices, as this helps to maintain a more cohesive society’ – voted for Brexit (Curtice, 2017). It is not the least of the paradoxes of the Brexit vote that a desire for the (mythical) cohesion and securities of the past led to a vote for a profoundly uncertain future.

Part of the explanation may lie in the lingering legacy of the UK’s colonialist and imperialist past. The Leave campaign insisted that the United Kingdom, freed from European shackles, could have a place in a wider world, which seemed, very broadly, to have been defined in terms of the largely Anglophone world familiar, at least to an older generation, from notions of empire, even if transformed into Commonwealth. Favell (p. 197) quotes the astonishing view of one voter that leaving the EU would make no difference because ‘British people have been able to travel and live anywhere they wanted in the world for more than three hundred years now’. The sense of entitlement
based on an unconscious belief in ‘Great British colonial birthright’ (p. 197) may have underpinned the credibility attached to the confident assertions of the Leave campaign that it would indeed be possible, as one official’s notes put it, to ‘have cake and eat it’ (The Times 29 November 2016). Mrs May’s government seem only slowly to be withdrawing from the notion that what they ask for in negotiating with the EU they will, of course, be accorded.

There is clearly a great deal more work to be done on the rhetoric that draws on this sense of entitlement and the sociological basis for its reception. A number of the contributors to this volume tackle the thorny question of identity and its meanings, and here, the constructivists undoubtedly have more to say. Favell (p. 192) points out that studies of Europeanization, which proliferated in the 1990s and 2000s, (for an overview see Graziano and Vink, 2008) concentrated on public policy and the machinery of political action. There have, however, been multiple ways in which the behaviour of people, and especially young people, in the United Kingdom may, within the context of increasing globalization, equally have become increasingly ‘Europeanized’ – holidays, travel, Erasmus exchanges in higher education, contact with citizens from other EU member states in work and social environment, all undoubtedly aided by the propensity of other Europeans to speak English, which compensates for the appalling decline in modern language learning in UK education. The massive vote by the young for ‘remain’ (probably some 70% of the 64% of the 18–24 age cohort who voted [The Observer 10 July 2016]) and for Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour in the 2017 general election (over 60% of the over 65% of the 18–24 age group who voted [The Guardian 17 June 2017]) seems to reflect this facet of society. What is striking, however, about these apparent changes in the social foundations of politics (as, well, perhaps as law and economics [p. 194]) is the absence in the United Kingdom of any discursive or rhetorical expression of them. There have, in other words, been no cues to facilitate the formation of more inclusive identities (on the role of cues see Hooghe and Marks, 2009: 11). While explicit imperialist rhetoric has disappeared there appears to be no reception in the United Kingdom for the discourse around a ‘European project’ which is widely found elsewhere, for example, in Emmanuel Macron’s extraordinary and successful campaign for the French presidency. Questions of identity and its discursive expression ought to continue to pre-occupy some sociologists for some time to come.

Another discursive issue which will warrant much further consideration is the question of trust within society. Those who study social capital have long touched on this, and it has figured in some of the debates about the nature of social cohesion. There have long been questions about declining trust in professionalism ‘from above’ – governmentally imposed regimes and inspection in education, medical care and other sectors, but in the Brexit debate, a similar distrust was manifest ‘from below’, as many voters seemed to share minister Michael Gove’s view that Britain ‘has had enough of experts’ (Financial Times 3 June 2016, see also Anand Menon in The Telegraph 17 March 2017) and the result was ‘a revolt of the governed, who chose not to side with the serried ranks of elites and experts’, and certainly did not trust the government enough to follow its advice to vote for remain (Glencross, 2017). As a substitute for expertise both campaigns made definite statements about what would happen and presented a ‘false binary option’ (Glencross, 2017). The contributions of Wiener and Susen to this volume both consider
a range of options relating to the triggering of Article 50 (now largely overtaken by the notification of March 2017) and to the ultimate shape of the UK/EU relationships. Whatever eventually transpires it is clear that many voters will be unhappy to discover that what they thought they voted for is not going to occur. This is not likely to further either the credibility of politicians or the cohesion of society.

Tim Oliver (http://timoliver.blogspot.co.uk/2017/06/a-bibliography-of-books-on-brexit.html) lists 29 books on Brexit published or announced for 2017. It is pertinent to enquire where Outhwaite’s volume stands amongst this rush into print. Those looking for a serious study based on sound academic analysis will find it here. William Outhwaite is to be commended for its production and it is strongly recommended to students and researchers alike interested in the British political and social trajectory, not least for the extent of the reflections it produces and the questions it open up. Its many merits include an emphasis on argument based on sound evidence, an interdisciplinary outlook that seeks to bring a sociological perspective to bear on political, international, legal and economic issues, a willingness to take at least a first shot at theoretical implications and an admirably comprehensive coverage. Its faults are few; some of them are undoubtedly related to the challenge of putting together an edited volume from a wide range of contributors at some speed – some overlaps, some variability in the clarity and pertinence of the contributions, the occasional proof-reading lapse – and others stem from the speed of the events in the middle of which it appeared. It is even possible that the outcome of the June 2017 election might have caused some moderation of the howl of despair at the implications of a hard Brexit with which the volume concludes.

Note
1. All references showing page numbers alone are to the contents of Brexit: A Sociological Response.

References