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*IReflect* – Student Journal of International Relations 2017,  
Vol. 4 (1), pp 89-92

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Published by



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Berlin, June 2017



# When Hate Trumps Reason: A Brexit Diary

Sebastian Möller

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Since the British referendum in June 2016, many studies on Brexit have been published<sup>1</sup> and many blogs continue to enhance our understanding<sup>2</sup>. Still, the matter is more complicated than many popular narratives suggest and citizens, policy-makers, and observers within and outside the UK remain somewhat puzzled as to the reasons and repercussions of the decision to leave the EU. This comment provides some insights to the Brexit discourse during the time I stayed in Manchester as a visiting researcher in late 2016, a period said to be the most tumultuous one in post-WWII British politics<sup>3</sup>. I certainly have a specific view on this as a foreigner, academic, and as someone who enjoys European cosmopolitanism while opposing the overall neoliberal orientation of many EU policies. Thus, this brief Brexit diary is a rather subjective reflection.

When I started my research stay in early October, no conversation could be held without mentioning Brexit and its obscure implications. People were concerned about the falling British Pound (a fact that actually made living in the UK considerably cheaper) and a country was in outrage about the temporary disappearance of the beloved Marmite from the supermarket shelves. Fewer people, however, were concerned about the future prospects of the European project, a perspective that dominates debates “in Europe” as British people use to say not only since the Leave vote. The election of a misogynyn real estate mogul as the next US President, however, has turned the attention towards the other side of the Atlantic. Mr. Trump has both ironically and successfully claimed to be a champion for the (white & male) working class and promised to turn Election Day into a “Brexit plus”. If this means anything else than upsetting the political elite and turning mass

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the Brexit Special Forum in *Globalizations* 14(1); Goodwin, M. / Heath, O., 2016. The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result. In: *The Political Quarterly*, 87(3), 323-332; Oppermann, K., 2016. Das gesplittene Königreich. Die politischen Hintergründe und Ursachen des „Brexit“-Referendums. In: *PVS*, 57(4), 516-533; Watkins, S., 2016. Casting off? In: *New Left Review*, 100 (2), 5-31.

<sup>2</sup> Among others, the LSE Brexit blog and the Politico Brexit Files are quite helpful in this regard. Also, Verso Books has various blog posts and a comprehensive report on this issue.

<sup>3</sup> See the “Brexit: Six Month on” report by UK in a Changing World and the Political Studies Association: <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Brexit-Six-months-on.pdf> [03/01/2017].

frustration into politics benefiting the privileged few remains to be seen. Certainly, his campaign has made America hate again, something the Brexiteers also have achieved in the UK. In both countries, feelings of exclusion and deprivation of broad shares of the population were successfully mobilized for political projects that promised a more prosperous future grounded in the exclusion of others; projects that might become boomerangs for their supporters. This is not to say that there were no legitimate reasons to vote against the EU or the US political establishment. However, both campaigns were built on promises that can never be achieved with the proposed policies. This kind of post-truth is more alarming for democracy than the strategic lies that are usually referred to by this questionable term<sup>4</sup>.

Brexit not only regularly popped up in casual conversations and in my expert interviews on the financialization of British local government, it also dominated the public discourse. This is not only due to its utmost importance but also to its opaqueness. Brexit means different things to different people: Something for every taste – hard or soft Brexit, smart, dirty or bloody Brexit<sup>5</sup>. This renders Theresa May's mantra "Brexit means Brexit" a pretty dull statement. One would have thought that conditions of leaving the EU were actually discussed before the referendum. Back then, however, more energy was spent on encouraging nationalist and racist sentiments and redirecting frustration over rising inequality and an increasingly dysfunctional state towards immigrants and Brussels. It is probably fair to say that only UKIP really took the campaign seriously since they have always hated the EU, immigration, and modernization. Others, who might have considered this a game, are still struggling to find a way out of the mess which they have caused.

Unfortunately, the post-referendum public debate has not become much more sophisticated. While the government provided little more than uncertainty and Labor struggles to address the country's and its own fragmentation, the mainstream media denounce all attempts to prolong the political process as undemocratic and evil. Papers that have been pushing for Brexit<sup>6</sup> turned even nastier after their success, making sure that racist sentiments keep simmering, impeding any potential concessions towards free movement of people in order to stay in the Single Market. Branding judges who were in favour of giving the Parliament a say as "enemies of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Frieder Vogelmann's critique on the term "postfaktisch": <http://www.sozio.polis.de/verstehen/wie-spricht-die-wissenschaft/artikel/postfaktisch/> [02/01/2017].

<sup>5</sup> See Tim Oliver's "Brexicon" for more absurd types of Brexit: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/12/22/now-thats-what-i-call-brexit-delving-into-the-brexicon-of-brexit/> [02/01/2017].

<sup>6</sup> Namely The Sun, Daily Mail, Daily Express, Daily Telegraph, and Times.

people” on the front page is almost a fascist move<sup>7</sup>. Yet it has not been the worst outbreak of printed or broadcasted hate. The same papers, consequently, keep on featuring Nigel Farage and even have recommended him as future Ambassador to the United States<sup>8</sup>. The question why a man who does not even have a seat in Westminster is so broadly featured, even by the BBC, is beyond me. If you get bombarded with hate on a daily basis, you might be more likely to also hate. “Haters gonna hate”, as Brendon Cox cited a Taylor Swift song as response to another of Farage’s outrageous tweets. Cox is the widower of MP Joe Cox who was murdered by a right-wing terrorist during the referendum campaign. Unfortunately, #NoMoreNigel will remain a pipe dream while the nightmare of hate crimes<sup>9</sup> and open discrimination<sup>10</sup>, continues to be sad reality.

Meanwhile, the Autumn Statement revealed some of the costs of Brexit<sup>11</sup>, the financial sector begs for a special deal<sup>12</sup>, Scottish PM Nicola Sturgeon upholds the threat of another independence referendum, and cabinet finds out that UK trade deals will be tedious work. It turns out that the UK’s attractiveness for trading partners has been slightly overestimated and that any substantive deal with India, for instance, could only be achieved if the UK loosens immigration rules. This, however, is exactly the opposite of what Leave voters were promised. As Paul Mason rightly stated in a talk in Manchester, Brexit is a disaster for Britain since it might end up having to accept the worst possible deal. Like others, Mason stresses that wage-stagnation and austerity are to blame for the frustration that made people vote for Brexit. The fact that the Conservatives, recently, have discovered the Jams (the just about managing) as new constituency and May’s second mantra of “building a country that works for everyone”, however, do not signal any substantial renunciation of austerity. To the contrary, the household benefit cap was even further tightened in November, “the biggest benefit cut that you’ve never heard of”<sup>13</sup>.

While May has ruled out a second referendum, the UK still might end up with one in the face of unsatisfactory negotiation outcomes. Then, the British people actually could take an informed decision. In any case, much damage

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<sup>7</sup> Daily Mail, 04 November 2016; In November, the student union of the City University of London decided to ban Sun, Daily Mail, and Express from campus in order to “cease to fuel fascism, racial tension and hatred in society”.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Daily Express, 15/11/2016.

<sup>9</sup> Hate crimes against Polish people and other foreigners have recently reached record levels.

<sup>10</sup> It is reported that more and more nurses from other EU countries are quitting and returning to their home countries as a result of racist abuse from patients which causes a severe staff shortage in some hospitals (Times, 18/11/2016, p. 4).

<sup>11</sup> The Guardian, 24/11/2016.

<sup>12</sup> The Guardian, 14/12/2016.

<sup>13</sup> Chakraborty, A., 2016. Creating Child Poverty for a Whole New Generation. Take a Bow, Theresa May. In: *The Guardian*, 01/11/2016, p. 33.

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has been done. There is much more to worry about than our access to the British academic system. The country that I have come to admire for its openness and diversity has noticeably changed; changed to the worse. Reversing this trend requires not less than a fundamental questioning of neo-liberalism and austerity in order to effectively fight inequality. While Brexit might not be in the interest of most capital owners, neither would be such a policy. Thus, in or out, the UK needs political change that would have to be achieved against stiff resistance.

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