

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO WHY BREXIT MATTERS

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The anthropology of Brexit reflects a complicated Brexit process that has involved all of the nations of Europe in various ways, and has been linked to other social, political and economic forces worldwide. With reference to four views of Brexit by anthropologists long known for their ethnographic work in the UK, France, Hungary, Ireland and the former Yugoslavia, this introduction to a special issue reviews the Brexit process as both a chronicle of what has already been achieved by anthropologists and as a possible stimulus to future research. It argues that the anthropology of Brexit should be viewed from many perspectives, including but not limited to the comparative examination of power, culture and political economy.

Keywords: European integration, Europeanization, Brexit, ethnography, public power

The anthropology of Brexit began suddenly, surprisingly, and emotionally, mirroring the impact that the Brexit vote itself seemed to have on so many people in the British Isles and beyond. As the Brexit referendum has receded, however, it has been replaced by a complicated Brexit process that has affected the nations of Europe in various ways, and has been linked to other social, political and economic forces worldwide. The anthropology of Brexit too has moved on, reflecting the many methodological and theoretical perspectives that can and perhaps should be brought to bear to try to capture, chronicle and understand the mercurial Brexit phenomenon.

This article serves as an introduction to four views of Brexit by anthropologists long known for their ethnographic work in the UK, France, Hungary, Ireland and the former Yugoslavia. It is intended as a partial review of what has already been accom-

plished by some anthropologists in relation to the Brexit process, and as a possible stimulus to future research, particularly in the comparative examination of power, culture and political economy.¹ It also suggests that while the Brexit process, like so many ongoing relations of power in the contemporary world, does not seem to have a predictable, and maybe will never have a recognizable, end point, it has also been fashioned through various discernible and concrete events, people, decisions, policies, negotiations and attendant and resultant individual and group responses. These, on their own and together, are the veritable stuff of anthropological and ethnographic inquiry.²

This is not a universally held notion among anthropologists today, despite repeated calls by leading scholars to study issues of power in relation to the social formations of the state and capitalism. In the

first chapter of his collected essays, Eric Wolf, writing in 1969, argued that “the dominant intellectual issue of the present is the nature of public power and its exercise, wise or unwise, responsible or irresponsible” (2001: 14). I suggest that this is as true today as it was then, but it may not be a dominant intellectual issue for anthropologists worldwide. This is somewhat bewildering, if not tragic, in the face of the current pandemic, and the global response to racism triggered by a wrongful death at the hands of the police in Minneapolis, which taken together might give anthropologists cause yet again to reconsider Wolf’s words of decades ago. While many anthropologists address issues of power regularly in their work, in research, publishing and teaching, particularly in regard to biopolitics, interpersonal power, and governmentality, public power is much less prominent in general social and cultural anthropology, despite calls for anthropologists to contribute to a public anthropology that would be expected to matter more to the many publics anthropologists seek to serve (Borofsky 2019).³

Brexit as an event and as an ongoing process in geopolitical affairs challenges all concerned anthropologists to address a range of issues related to the vicissitudes of power in Europe today.⁴ Anthropologists and their cognate social scientists have done this through an engagement with what the Brexit vote, in a referendum in the United Kingdom in 2016 in which the British electorate decided whether their country should exit or remain in the European Union (EU), and the subsequent Brexit effects, have meant to them and to their research respondents, interlocutors, friends and neighbors.

The examples of anthropological approaches to, and concerns with, Brexit that are included in this special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* offer historical and contemporary perspectives on the impact of illiberal democracy in Hungary, the significance for European integration of transnational and international integration in other political entities, such as the former Yugoslavia, and the fear and anxiety produced by Brexit among Europeans from other nation-states living and working in Britain, and among the British and Irish in Northern Ireland

who never left the UK but now wonder about the effects of being ejected from the EU. All of these cases, depending on the people asked and affected, address how Brexit is simultaneously wise and unwise, responsible and irresponsible, and definitely an exercise in power.

These four perspectives on Brexit by anthropologists, who have ethnographically investigated the political economy of Europe for many decades, are in line with a growing body of work by anthropologists who have responded to the turmoil precipitated by the referendum. This Brexit process has spread across the continent and the globe, and has gone beyond an event that signaled political and economic transformation for the people of the UK, to become a symbol of so much more that is central to the future of European integration.

The Brexit Process

Taken together, the authors in this special issue engage Brexit as a process of social, political and economic change that dates at least in part to the referendum in the UK in 2016, but is a process with older and much more diverse origins. For the people most directly affected that are the concern of our four approaches to Brexit, the processes of change that are encompassed under the umbrella of Brexit are related to specific significant events, times and places. But they are also symbolic of longer held beliefs, memories, ideologies and emotions, related to such things as the nation, civil society, democracy, citizenship, human rights, and representative government. For some, the specters of nationalist war in the Balkans and Ireland, or forced migration to or from Hungary and the UK, are conjured up by the anxiety released by the neonationalism so ably yet vaguely captured by the term, “Brexit”. The word itself has come to mean so much to so many that it alone demands anthropological attention.

As Jeremy MacClancy (2019: 369) has suggested, Brexit has taken on at least three meanings in public discourse, and it seems too among the British people with whom he has conducted ethnographic research. Brexit can refer to the referendum itself, to the UK’s exit itself (which commenced on 31 January 2020),

and to the political process engendered in the UK and in the EU by the exit. But Brexit also has meaning and is a cause of concern more broadly, across the EU and globally. It seems prudent, then, to add at least two more dimensions of Brexit that have taken shape.

First, Brexit has become a symbol as well as an indication of important political processes that seem to be affecting every member state of the EU. While various interest groups and political constituencies in the other 27 states have different reasons to support, oppose, be sympathetic with or be against what they perceive Brexit is about in the UK, it is clear that many opponents and supporters across the continent associate Brexit and its relationship to the EU with such things as economic hardship, austerity, national sovereignty, and centralized political authority and control. The widely perceived economic and political roots to the general disgruntlement among the electorate in the UK seem to have resonated among other populist and regional movements across the continent, and seemingly are at the core of many citizens' protests beyond Britain's shores.

These movements, ideas and changes are fundamental to the continuing health of the EU project and to member states' participation in it. Brexit has presented conditions that now challenge each member state to confront the question of whether leaving the EU is desirable and achievable, or perhaps to expect that various groups in their own countries will call for this in more and more forceful ways. At the very least, the Brexit withdrawal process has given the EU, its member states, and sympathetic and antagonistic interest groups a model for, and a lesson in, how difficult it is to achieve a smooth exit. As it stands now Brexit has taken four years, there is still the possibility of its engendering a return to violence in one of the UK's regions, and the short- and long-term social, political and economic effects on each of the UK's nations remain obscure. Ironically, this makes Brexit remarkably akin to European integration, where there is no ending or clear goal in sight (perhaps for some the realization of both European integration and Brexit are unimaginable), but there is a perceived need to keep moving forward to see

where it all leads. As a morality tale or value lesson the UK's Brexit serves as an inspiration and a warning to the rest of Europe.⁵

Second, Brexit has had an impact on the affective dimensions of being and becoming European. Brexit has reverberated across Europe, if not the globe, as a sign of changed relations between citizens and the state. It is also a symbol of the transformations between and among regions, nations, states and supranational political and economic entities. This assault on the affective dimensions of European identity and citizenship may or may not represent or herald a sea-change in Europeanization, but it definitely indicates that much that the EU has tried to achieve in regard to making its citizens more productive in, and constructive of, Europe has not been effective. This tension between the affective and the effective is at the heart of what caused Brexit and how it is experienced and articulated.

Brexit's transformative significance in the lives of Europeans of all sorts, including anthropologists, was apparent from the moment the referendum results were announced. One of the leading anthropologists of Europe, Sarah Green, then editor of the journal *Social Anthropology*, invited anthropologists to contribute to a forum on Brexit. Twenty-four responded within five days of the Brexit announcement. In Green's words (2016: 478), these "first reactions from anthropology" were "immediate," "raw," and "an echo chamber of all the endless discussion that came in the aftermath of the result". She also characterized these responses as "considered observation" and "emotional reaction". The responses themselves displayed a great deal of emotion, vitiated by various ethnographic experiences and sensibilities. Many focused on the grander significance of Brexit for the anthropological project in general, and the anthropology of Europe in particular. Others considered what Brexit said about the current state of democracy, governance, citizenship, and various identities, including the national, within the contradictory EU and nationally-filtered neoliberalism. Still others looked at the potential impact of Brexit on the people with whom they have lived and worked. Almost all addressed one key theme that has

remained central to Brexit: the perceived loss of, and the need to take back, control, even if what was lost and how to take it back are as vaguely defined as is the notion of control.

Longer and more ethnographically rich analyses by anthropologists of Brexit and its aftermath followed, most notably in a forum published in *American Ethnologist* in 2017 (see, e.g., Edwards, Haugerud & Parikh 2017; Evans 2017; Gusterson 2017; Knight 2017). This second set of responses from anthropologists reinforced many of the themes found in the first group, which reflected how so many people in the UK and beyond have been adapting to the exigencies of Brexit. Many of these key themes reflect longstanding anthropological interests in Europe that are too numerous to review here. But a few stand out, and are worth noting because they figure in the essays of this collection, and they will continue to enhance if not bewilder a Brexit process that has no end in sight, despite current Tory government insistence that the withdrawal has been accomplished *per* the wishes of the British people.

Brexit highlights the issues of a bordered and bordering Europe, in an EU that itself is a continuing border experiment (Green 2013, 2017). This re-bordering of Europe has had particular salience in an evolving Europe of the regions (Wilson 2012b, 2012c). Brexit has in fact become a significant trope in the discourse on globalization and the intersection of a “borderless” world with the still vexing issues of territoriality and identity (Anderson 2018; O’Dowd 2010). Brexit thus offers fertile ground for comparative and historical scholarship on earlier attempts to forge supra-local political systems that produced power and other inequities (Gardner 2017). In this vein Robert Hayden (2020), in this volume, compares the ideologies and practices at work in the dissolution of the Yugoslav Union to the present EU crisis, and he explores the cause and effect of an “exititis” syndrome. Borders also are key elements in the issues raised by voters and elites alike about what needs to be regained, in taking back control of national sovereignty and security (Follis 2017). These have been key concerns of anthropologists in Europe who have investigated the tragedies

of the often-failed attempts by refugees from Africa and the Middle East to reach the nominal haven of the EU. This dark period in the EU’s history has led many anthropologists to reconsider the institutions and laws of the EU, for example in terms of a migration regime or apparatus (Feldman 2011; Hess & Kasperek 2017). In addition, Brexit, as a matter for law and diplomacy, has redirected anthropological attention back to the European civil service and other elites (as pioneered in Bellier 1997; Bellier & Wilson 2000; Shore 2000), to help to understand the changing nature of public policy and borders (Wilson 2012a). As Deborah Reed-Danahay notes in this volume, Brexit has had a marked impact on the daily lives, expectations and emotions of French citizens in England, including a Brexit-induced ambiguity of belonging (2020).

This ambiguity is not the preserve of migrants, whether they be refugees or “lifestyle” ones (MacClancy 2019). The problems of European identity, that conjure up notions of liminality and hierarchy, also affect newly admitted European citizens coming to grips with a Soviet-framed past (Ilieva & Wilson 2011), those excluded by geography or citizenship who must contend with being permanently but never entirely outside of the practices and institutions of European integration (Jansen 2009), those political leaders who walk a fine line between serving the interests of their nation and the virtual Europe of the EU (Abélès 2017), and longtime residents and citizens of Europe who may be forced to re-prioritize their national and European identities because of the violence in their lives caused by Brexit (Wilson 2020, this volume). European integration has created many avenues for transnationalism and the construction of various forms of European identity (Hermann & Brewer 2004; Laffan 2004). This transnationalism has arisen among longstanding residents as well as migrants, who have embraced shared sovereignty and multi-level and supranational governance, constituting perhaps the beginnings of a post-national identity (Hedetoft & Hjort 2002). But Brexit has also been symbolic, if not also the cause, of new and lingering nationalism, which seem pervasive in the European scene (Banks & Gingrich 2006; Gingrich 2006; Wilson

2019). This neonationalism is so powerful a force in Europe today that political parties and governments have embraced it in the guise of a new form of democracy, as for example in making “illiberalism” a desired goal of the body politic in Hungary today, as László Kürti analyzes in this volume (2020). This brings us full circle to the Brexit focus on government and governance. As Insa Koch concludes in regard to the people in a housing estate in south-east England with whom she discussed their overwhelming support of Brexit in 2016, “the referendum was a chance to say no to government as they knew it and in so doing to risk a plunge into more moral, yet unknown, futures” (2017: 226). Brexit has likewise plunged anthropology into an unknown future, the morality of which is yet to be determined.

Brexit: Antagonism and Solidarity

The authors in this collection address in various ways the manner in which different levels of socio-cultural, political and economic integration have impinged on people across Europe. These portraits mirror dilemmas for anthropologists of the past who tried to match macro-theory to micro-cases derived from ethnographic research.⁶

Today, Wolf would have a great deal to offer on how neoliberalism triumphant has led inexorably to what caused and what bedevils Brexit. Throughout his career the central question to his work was how might anthropology best use its theories and methods to effect social change. For example, in his longstanding problematization of society and community as bounded entities, Wolf disputed prevalent notions in ethnographic case studies that viewed local communities as “havens of sociability and solidarity” that were microcosms of other levels of moral integration (Wolf 2001: 57).

In fieldwork, one soon realizes that antagonistic and solidary behavior, as well as discourses about enmities and solidarity, depend upon the differential positions and interests of people. These positions and interests ... may be tied to divergent networks of power that link people to translocal endeavors. (Wolf 2001: 57)

The articles in this special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea*, akin to those in the wider anthropology of Brexit already cited, offer some insights on the antagonistic and solidary behaviors of Europeans that are tied directly or indirectly to the Brexit process. The EU, as a prime motor of European integration and Europeanization, has been a significant arena for the changing configurations of power in transnational and international affairs in Europe for a half century (Borneman & Fowler 1997). Brexit is its newest and perhaps most threatening crisis, but the EU has remarkably potent survival instincts and has seemingly grown stronger in moving from crisis to crisis (Wilson 2010). In this vein Brexit should not be approached as a crisis to be managed, as if with proper care and sensitivity it will come to its relative end, and the UK and Europe can get back to normalcy. On the contrary, Brexit is a node or wheel in the EU's endemic crisis-structure, wherein its institutional framework and related actions and meanings are continuously if not constantly tested.⁷

In anthropologists' attempts to understand Brexit as a threat or support to the localities, regions and nations of Europe, and to adequately engage the “realities of power,” they must contribute to “a critical and comprehensive history of the modern world” (Wolf 2001: 21). Anthropological responses to the Brexit process are in their own ways chronicles of the contemporary history of the political economy of member states within the EU. Brexit helps to delineate the EU as a region where transnational capital and supranational political institutions frame, inform and sometimes collide with local activism, regional social movements, fluid labor markets and ethno-nationalism, creating the new bases for transnationalism. This has resulted in a “politicization” of the EU, where local and national politics are often intertwined with transnational, international and European politics, so much so for some that Europe often becomes a convenient panacea or scapegoat for problems that have much more local origins and solutions. The Brexit process, whether in its British realization or in its effects more broadly, demands that anthropology globally consider the EU's role as the singular most robust experiment in

post-nationalism and supranationalism in the world today. However, while Europhiles see this experiment as one that promotes liberalism and democracy, one of the unsurprising effects of the Brexit process has been to highlight, as Ulf Hedetoft argues in his commentary on this special issue (2020), that many Europeans have come to perceive the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and democracy, a “non-democratic set-up” meant to subordinate national aspirations. In this way Europeanization and European integration should also be seen, in addition to a reordering of territory and identity (cf. Borneman & Fowler 1997) that promotes transnationalism, as experiments too in re-nationalizing many places and peoples across the continent.⁸

The Brexit vote throughout the UK revolved around calls to take back control from an undemocratic Brussels. The Brexit process, which culminated in the results of the British general election in 2019, shows still that many of the poorest and most disenfranchised in Britain continue to register their disapproval of the humanistic neoliberalism of European integration by again voting “no to government”. But the rhetoric of control is itself testament to the lack of control over Brexit by elites as well as the middle and working classes. As the Irish public intellectual Fintan O’Toole (2018) has pointed out, the real agenda of Brexiteers “is not ... about taking back control; it is about letting go of control,” about deregulation and the continuation of the neoliberal project. Only now, many Brexiteers must contemplate whether they have let a genie out of the bottle who has no intention of going back. Brexit is a process that anthropologists, among many others, can attest is out of control, with no particular assurance offered by anyone as to what can and will be taken back, and what if anything can be controlled by Westminster, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast, or Brussels.

The articles that follow by Reed-Danahay, Wilson, Hayden and Kürti not only provide further reflections on the Brexit vote and process, they are evidence of how anthropologists continue to work in the interstices of levels and boundaries of European, national and local differentiation and integration.

They are examples of “good anthropology,” in Wolf’s sense, which “was always characterized by a postmodern skepticism about the certainty and fixity of things” (Wolf 2001: 53). The Brexit process, as seen in the legacy of exititis in the former Yugoslavia, French migrants to London, the victims and beneficiaries of illiberal democracy in Hungary, and the anxious nationalists of the Northern Ireland borderlands, is a paradigmatic demonstration of skepticism over the loss of certainty and the lack of fixity in contemporary society, economy and polity. As Hedetoft points out in his commentary, Brexit has shown the brittleness of both a unitary UK and unitary Britishness, and in recognizing this fragility the peoples of Europe and of the world, including anthropologists and other ethnographers, must also consider the brittleness of polity, economy and identity elsewhere. This brittleness is nowhere more apparent today than in the American responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, in which, in a manner similar to various European responses to Brexit, the global catastrophe is handled in peculiarly local, and at times, idiosyncratic, ways.

The Brexit vote of 2016 makes a great deal of sense, despite all of the shock and chagrin it generated, when the notions of local people saying yes to some things and no to others are considered. The Brexit process also needs to include consideration by scholars as well as political and economic elites of the local appreciation of who wins and who loses in it. But local notions are just part of the ethnographic endeavor. While Eric Wolf noted that anthropology’s value was in part due to its “proclivity to pay attention to what others left unheeded” (2001: 50), he also admonished anthropologists to remember another aspect of the ethnographic imperative: “Things are rarely what they seem, and they are only rarely how they are presented to you by locals” (2001: 53). As the articles of this special issue indicate, Brexit is taking on proportions in European life that dwarf its initial dimensions. Ethnographic and other anthropological takes on Brexit show too that, whether in the presentations of locals or in grander views, it continues to be a lot more than it seems.

Notes

- 1 This special issue began as a panel session that was invited by the Society for the Anthropology of Europe to be included on the program of the American Anthropological Association annual meetings in Washington, DC, on 2 December 2017. The session, organized and chaired by Thomas M. Wilson, was entitled “Brexit Matters: Transformations in Regional, National and European Integration,” and included papers by Robert M. Hayden, László Kürti, Anders Linde-Laursen, Deborah Reed-Danahay and Thomas M. Wilson. I would like to thank the participants on the panel, the contributors to this special issue, the Society for the Anthropology of Europe, particularly its annual meeting program chair in 2017, Nicolette Makovsky, *Ethnologia Europaea*’s editors, Marie Sandberg and Monique Scheer, and peer referees for their support in this collective work.
- 2 While the UK’s exit from the EU has in a manner of speaking come and gone, in January 2020, it still lingers. At the time of revising this introduction, the UK and the EU are in continuing negotiations about what aspects of the initial exit deal can and should remain.
- 3 The paradigmatic changes of the 1980s and 1990s that redirected social and cultural anthropology away from many former theoretical and methodological concerns and practices did not fully erase anthropological attention to issues still represented in Marxist and Marxian approaches to political economy and applied anthropology. These approaches have survived in anthropology even if they have not thrived. But the hegemony of other paradigms in anthropology begs the question as to what the discipline of anthropology has been doing, and contributing, in the fifty years since Wolf first wrote these words. One answer to this question perhaps lies in another conclusion Wolf reached in 1969: “we face at the moment a descent into triviality and irrelevance. This descent into triviality seems to me, above all, marked by an increasing concern for pure technique” (Wolf 2001: 21). One feature of this technique has been an insistence, in Borofsky’s terms (2019), to “do no harm” in research and writing. This methodological and ideological prescription has become so ingrained in the field of anthropology over the last two generations that anthropologists have to a great degree avoided identifying and trying to help solve problems in public life recognized by our wider societies as significant. There are indications, though, that some anthropologists worldwide are increasingly seeking to stop the inward and insular turn that social and cultural anthropology has adopted. This may be seen in recent calls for anthropologists to (re)dedicate themselves to a public anthropology, wherein social and cultural anthropologists would ask Big Questions through a consideration of wider contextual Big Pictures in order to increase the general public’s awareness of the contributions anthropology can make to solutions in public life (Borofsky 2019). While there may be many equally momentous, there are no bigger questions or pictures in public life in Europe than those related to what Brexit has done and come to mean across the continent, if not also the globe.
- 4 While I would contend that anthropologists everywhere should, and most do, address some if not all modes and levels of power, in this article I refer mainly to public and institutional power to be found within the political economy of the region, nation, state and EU. In terms introduced by Eric Wolf’s analysis of modes of power (Wolf 1990) as they relate to different levels of social relations, I am addressing in the main organizational, interpersonal and structural power. A fuller analysis of the wider and deeper affective dimensions of the populism and identity responses to European integration which are related to Brexit, including the banal Europeanism I see as having taken hold in Northern Ireland today, would also entail an analysis of biopolitics.
- 5 My thanks to Monique Scheer for pressing me on this point from an earlier draft.
- 6 I was first exposed to this dilemma through the teaching and mentorship of former doctoral students of Eric Wolf, and later, more directly, in my studies in City University of New York, through Wolf and his colleagues Edward Hansen, Jane and Peter Schneider, and John Cole. In particular, Wolf was indebted to Julian Steward who saw family, community and nation and state as intersecting levels of social and cultural integration. But despite the intellectual and academic debts he owed him, Wolf (2001: 56–57) parted company with Steward. Where Steward emphasized cultural ecology as the prime force that differentiated hierarchically related levels of society, Wolf focused on capitalism.
- 7 In this part of my analysis I have been influenced by scholars in border studies, such as Hess and Kasperek (2017), who have examined how migration and refugee crises are aspects of the structural contestations of border regimes.
- 8 My thanks to Marie Sandberg for encouraging me to clarify this contradiction in the experimental nature of European integration.

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