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Brexit is a policy innovation that causes uncertainty: to tackle it the government must avoid groupthink

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Brexit is a radical policy innovation that increases uncertainty. Richard Bronk (LSE) argues that the UK government should therefore improve its ability to navigate uncertain futures and avoid the perils of groupthink by remaining open to diverse sources of expertise. He also considers how the populist blame game may play out, as the imagined post-Brexit future collides with reality at the end of 2020.

During the EU referendum campaign of 2016, the Remain side repeatedly warned that if the UK voted to leave the European Union it would be faced with the choice between the Norway option of staying in the Single Market with no say in Brussels or, alternatively, trading on WTO terms, which would imply a large increase in trade frictions with the UK's main trading partner (the EU), increased red tape, and higher costs. These warnings were

dismissed as 'project fear'. As the world's fifth-largest economy, the Vote Leave campaign argued, the UK need only believe in itself and it could have its cake and eat it.



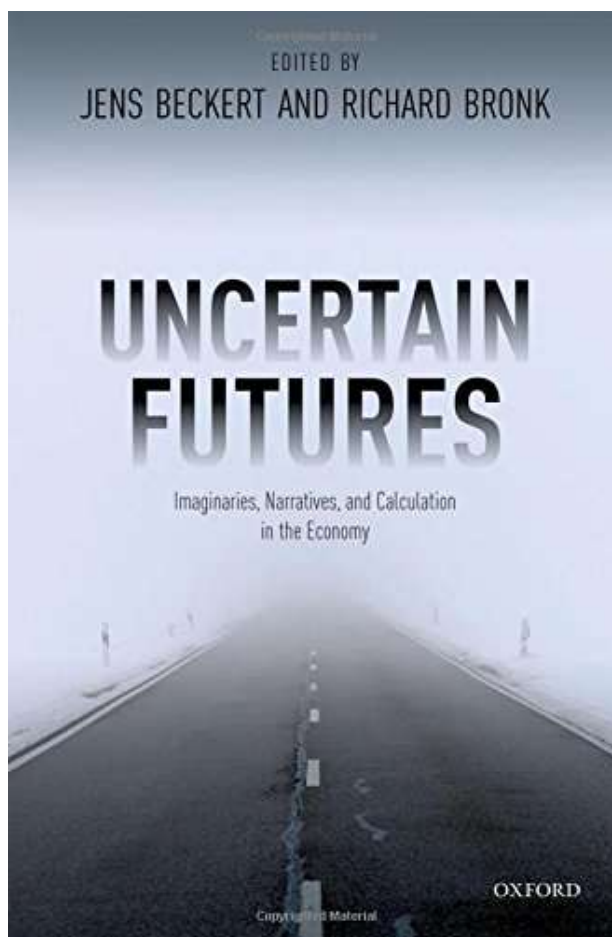
In our recent book, *Uncertain Futures*, Jens Beckert and I argue that all innovations – policy innovations like Brexit included – cause uncertainty. Innovations break the predictable links between the past and the future and insert novelty into the equations of life. As a result, it is not possible simply to rely on existing models and data from the past to tell us what will happen in future. In the jargon, the future is no longer a 'statistical shadow' of a known past. The more radical the innovation – and let's face it Brexit is a radical policy innovation – the more extreme the uncertainty implied.

In such circumstances, when future probabilities cannot be calculated, economic actors and voters alike have no choice but to rely on imaginaries and stories about the future – on how they (and those they most trust) *imagine* the future will turn out. As Leave campaigners were fond of pointing out in 2016, it was impossible to calculate with any precision the impact of an innovation like Brexit. It was certainly not possible to predict with any assured credibility the costs for each family of exiting the European Union – as the UK Treasury under George Osborne attempted to do.

Fast forward to this 2020 Spring and Summer of uncertain futures. As Henry Mance notes in a [recent article in the Financial Times](#), Michael Gove argued in his Ditchley lecture that politicians should take responsibility for the decisions they advocate. But, as Mance also points out, when pressed on the

costs that the Vote Leave dominated government itself now warns companies and voters are likely to face if the UK does not clinch a last-minute deal with the EU (and in many cases even if it does), Michael Gove and the Prime Minister are fond of appealing to 'Captain Hindsight'. No one could have known, the implication is, that Michel Barnier's negotiating team would stick to the EU's avowed aim of protecting the Single Market and refuse to allow privileged access to a country trumpeting its desire to forge a new and more deregulation-friendly path without any of the level-playing field and labour and environmental protections that apply to member states. After all, many Leavers confidently predicted that the EU would be unravelling by now anyway.

This raises an interesting issue that Jens Beckert and I consider in *Uncertain Futures*: just because the future is uncertain does not mean we can have no clue about it. Indeed, rational actors routinely use calculative models and experience to stress-test their imaginaries against known constraints and well-understood causal mechanisms. While they cannot predict the future – not least because they cannot know how others will react to a novel situation – they can have a shrewd idea of what is feasible and what is pure fantasy.



For example, while rational actors could not predict in 2016 precisely what the impact of leaving the Single Market would be, they did know how much evidence there is behind the gravity model of trade, which captures the tendency for countries to trade most easily and cheaply with countries in close proximity. Replacing trade with the EU with trade with distant countries that have fewer existing ties with the UK was always going to be an uphill

struggle even before President Trump ignited a trade war with China and reduced US support for the WTO.

My colleague, Nicholas Barr, summarised a number of other arguments advanced by expert witnesses before the 2016 referendum in an influential [LSE Brexit blog](#), while recognising the uncertainties involved. Together, these indicated that the imagined future in which Brexit would unleash vast new potential for the UK were economically and diplomatically implausible, while the risk that Brexit would destabilise the union of nations within the UK was significant.

In short, in the conditions of uncertainty caused by policy innovation, rational actors rely on expert judgment to say what, on the balance of the evidence, is a plausible imagined future and what is implausible. And, as the future begins to unfold, they rely on a variety of models and informed opinions to diagnose emerging patterns and ensure that they have not fallen in love with an imagined future that increasingly appears out of reach.

In a [recent paper](#), Wade Jacoby and I considered the implications of uncertainty for populist politics. We argued that, where innovation and uncertainty are rife, and where voters' expectations cannot, therefore, be anchored in objective probability assessments, populists are increasingly free to invent imagined futures that appeal to their base and suit their interests without fear of immediate and conclusive refutation. This freedom is all the greater if the populists succeed in convincing the electorate that they 'have had enough of experts', as Gove [famously argued in 2016](#). In such conditions of uncertainty and widespread denigration of experts, the future belongs to those who have the rhetorical and political power to make their narratives and simple slogans count.

The indeterminacy of outcomes in complex systems characterised by widespread innovation and corresponding uncertainty also means that any kind of forensic ex-post apportionment of blame for decisions that go wrong to particular individuals is much more difficult. Too many interdependent factors and decisions play a part for anyone to be held legally accountable. This means that politicians are increasingly free to ascribe blame to whatever

group of outsiders will – to paraphrase the anthropologist, Mary Douglas – help man the gates of their own tribal camp.

At some point, of course, imagined futures collide with present reality. As the Brexit transition period ends, it will be interesting to see where the Vote Leave government led by Boris Johnson seeks to place the blame for the disruption caused by the country taking the ‘hard-Brexit’ course it has advocated since the referendum. Will it be on the COVID crisis, on the opposition to Brexit for delaying the inevitable, or simply on the European Union for negotiating hard? And how easy will it be for the Opposition to make a rival narrative of blame attach to the Brexiteers themselves?

In his article, Henry Mance wonders if the denouement of the Brexit saga in 2020 will encourage Dominic Cummings to internalise more fully the influential writings of Philip Tetlock that he professes to admire. I would particularly recommend that Cummings read chapter three of Tetlock’s 2005 book, **Expert Political Judgment**, where he argues persuasively that political decision-makers make good judgments in relation to the future when, to borrow Isaiah Berlin’s famous distinction, they resemble canny foxes rather than hedgehogs. As Tetlock puts it, hedgehogs know ‘one big thing’, which lends itself to simple political messages; they ‘display bristly impatience with those who “do not get it”’ (p73); but they tend to ‘dig themselves into intellectual holes. The deeper they dig, the harder it gets to climb out and see what is happening outside’ (p118). By contrast, foxes are much more sceptical of grand claims, are ‘less likely to get swept away in their own rhetoric’ (p100), and they welcome constant challenges to their preconceptions from a wide variety of sources and groups. As a result, they are more likely to revise their opinions when facts on the ground change and are less often totally wrong.

As Wade Jacoby and I have argued **elsewhere**, analytical monocultures are politically and economically dangerous – leaving those enveloped in them at constant risk of shared cognitive myopia. It follows that the role of a good civil service is to present nuanced ‘on the one-hand, on the other-hand’ briefing that draws on a wide variety of different modelling techniques and perspectives provided by experts. There is, of course, always a danger of

groupthink even among those relying on experts, since those who work together frequently succumb to the siren calls of 'best practice', when in truth – given uncertainty – you cannot know what best practice will be. The answer is an institutional set-up that encourages the tendency, and enshrines the right, to challenge dominant paradigms.

Dominic Cummings reportedly sees himself as a challenger to groupthink and a great disrupter. But it is at least a reasonable fear that, now in government, the Vote Leave group led by Johnson, Gove, and Cummings are moving from being brave challengers of a tired status quo to paranoid defenders of a new groupthink. In particular, they seem increasingly intent on removing from positions of authority and influence all those who would challenge their now dominant vision of the future with contrary evidence and perspectives. If they take this route and consequently fail to update their aims in the light of emerging evidence, they will have to become ever more inventive in their attempts to shift the blame onto someone else when their imagined future collides with reality.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. Author details available at <https://imaginationineconomics.com>

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