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## **Brexit beyond culture wars**

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[rh]Brexit beyond culture wars

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[ti]What's in a vote?

Brexit beyond culture wars

[ab]The result of the United Kingdom's EU referendum has been interpreted as evidence of a "culture war" between proponents of liberal cosmopolitanism and defenders of socially conservative values. According to this interpretation, voters on both sides are seen as driven by identity-based politics. But on a council estate (social-housing project) in England, what made the EU referendum different from an ordinary election was that citizens perceived it as an opportunity to reject government as they know it. Citizens' engagements with the referendum constitute attempts to insert everyday moralities into electoral processes. They provide an opening into alternative, if yet unknown, futures that go beyond any singular narratives that divide the electorate into camps of so-called Leavers and Remainers.

[*culture wars, democracy, council estates, morality, futures, Brexit, United Kingdom*]

[dc]Upon being elected in December 2016 as a member of Parliament for Richmond Park, one of London's wealthier constituencies, Sarah Olney of the

Liberal Democrats party attributed her victory to the EU referendum six months earlier. "Richmond Park," she said, "was full of people like me, who felt the country was going wrong, that the politics of anger and division were on the rise, that the liberal, tolerant values we took for granted were under threat." She added, "Today we have said no. We will defend the Britain we love. We will stand up for the open, tolerant Britain we believe in" (Walker 2016). Olney's words are familiar to those who have been following public debates in Britain in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. There are few votes that have politicized and caused as much emotional backlash as the referendum, which asked voters if they wanted to leave the European Union. In the lead-up to the referendum, held June 23, 2016, anger was a central part of campaigns in favor of leaving, known as Leave. Now, in its aftermath, anger is expressed by voters from the opposing camp, Remain, who struggle to accept the referendum result.

The anger unleashed by the EU referendum stands in stark contrast to evidence of widespread withdrawal from, and disenchantment with, electoral processes in Britain and beyond. At 77.2 percent, voter turnout for the referendum was higher than for the last general election, in 2015, in which 66.1 percent of eligible voters participated.<sup>1</sup> In my field site, a large council estate (social-housing project) of over 11,000 residents in the southeast of England that I will call Park End, many residents came out to vote in favor of Leave, including people I had never known to be interested in electoral

politics.<sup>2</sup> Much has been made of the Leave campaign and how political demagogues such as Nigel Farage, the leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), misled Leave voters by blaming European and non-European Others for social and economic problems in Britain today. Think tanks and political commentators have further announced the advent of “culture wars” that divide the nation into distinct identities of those who voted to leave and those who voted to remain in the European Union. But these analyses often remain disconnected from the lived experiences of people who came out to vote on the day.

What can an ethnographic account of voting reveal about the frustrations, desires, and projects that inform people’s voting decisions? How can it help to make sense of the emotions unleashed by the Brexit referendum? And, more broadly, what does this tell us about the importance of affect and morality in politics? For many of my interlocutors and friends, what made Brexit different from an ordinary election was that they perceived it as an event that would make a difference in their lives in a way that standard electoral processes do not. This is because many saw Brexit as an opportunity to move beyond the current system by saying no to government tout court. Citizens’ engagement with the referendum constitutes an attempt to moralize politics by inserting everyday moralities into electoral processes. They provide a window into alternative, if yet

unknown, futures that go beyond any singular narratives that divide the electorate into camps of so-called Leavers and Remainers.

## [h1]Culture wars, democracy, and an anthropology of voting

[ni]In the aftermath of the EU referendum, political commentators, think tanks, and policy-research organizations have rushed to interpret the election results. According to a dominant narrative that has crystallized in the UK media (e.g., Bush 2016; Dunt 2016), there is emerging in the electorate a “culture war,” with parallels being drawn to the recent election of President Donald Trump in the United States.<sup>3</sup> For example, a study published in December 2016 concluded that the United Kingdom was at risk of descending into US-style “culture wars” between internationalist liberals and the defenders of socially conservative values (Stewart 2016). According to this account, Brexit and Trump voters are driven by identity politics, of which their anti-immigrant sentiments are a central feature. In lieu of the old divisions between class and related notions of a left-right divide, it is suggested that “the debate might be increasingly decided by views on acceptable social behavior and moral fairness, rather than redistribution and the role of the state” (Stewart 2016). In such a climate, voter-citizens become more susceptible to demagogic ideologies, such as those promoted in the much-publicized Leave campaign and the right-wing UKIP (cf. Evans

2017), which focused on the threat posed by European immigrants, and immigrants more broadly, for Britain's social and economic woes.

Dominant commentary on "cultural wars" tends to remain blind to the fact that both the EU referendum and Trump's electoral victory take place in a context of broader disenchantment with government. Recent upsurges of "nationalist populism" (Gusterson 2017) coexist with declining levels of voter turnout across much of the Euro-American world. This is particularly pronounced among the most marginalized sectors of society. According to Colin Crouch (2004), in the 21st century, democracy has been hollowed out of its substantive meanings as political debate has been colonized by corporate interests and decision-making taken over by technocratic experts and managerial thinking. But "post-democracy" is only the tip of a deeper crisis of political representation. Common themes that underline the developments across much of the Western world include the ascendancy of neoliberalism as a political and economic model (Brown 2015), the decline of a postwar social contract (Nugent 2012), economic inequality (Walley 2017), and, most recently, the rise of a new era of "austerity" politics (Bear 2015; Knight 2015; Muehlebach 2016). In the United Kingdom, austerity politics was realized by the Coalition government of Liberal Democrats and Conservatives and then the Conservative government, first in 2010 and then in 2015.

By drawing attention to a broader context of democratic disenchantment, a different set of questions can be prioritized from those that have prevailed until now. Here, I limit my analysis to the case of the EU referendum, although similar inquiries can be posed in relation to the US case. Rather than focusing on how the votes, on either side of the referendum question, reflect the “cultural” sentiments of given subgroups, an alternative starting point would be the significance of the EU referendum in the context of a profound crisis of political representation. This crisis, and the failures of real democracy, were highlighted by social movements, such as Occupy, which rejected the institutional features of representative democracy, chiefly elections, in favor of alternative practices (Juris 2012; Raza and Kurnik 2012). But elections themselves can also become moments of ritual or social transformation that open a window into different futures and political imaginations (Cook et al. 2016; Grisaffi 2013; Paley 2008). The anger, shock, and passion that the EU referendum unleashed among both those who voted to leave and those who voted to remain suggest that it is precisely the affective and social dimensions of Brexit that deserve closer attention.

Many of my friends and interlocutors on the Park End council estate saw the EU referendum as an opportunity to express deeply felt frustrations with their experience of citizenship. Unlike any other electoral exercise, 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. The council estate residents are not representative of “postindustrial” Britain, and are even less so than other Brexit voters from a broad variety of socioeconomic, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds. But their lived experiences of government, their disenchantment, their sense of betrayal about the past, and their hopes for the future reveal the limits of any singular “culture war” narrative. To illustrate this, I will first outline how citizenship has become a form of punishment, then discuss the impact that such experiences of punishment have on electoral processes generally, and the EU referendum specifically.

## [h1]Council estates in context

[ni]Council estates are housing developments that were once built and managed by municipal authorities called councils. Like other marginalized neighborhoods around the globe (be they Brazilian favelas, US inner-city neighborhoods, or French *banlieues*), council estates in the United Kingdom evoke the underclass and the poor. But these associations mask a more complex history of state-citizen relations that stood behind the mass construction of council estates in the postwar decades in response to an acute housing crisis caused by World War II. As housing owned and managed by the state, council estates were intimately linked to the state’s project of creating ideal citizens who would reflect the values of a postwar

industrial society. The ideal tenant was a male wage earner's nuclear family. Rent and housing management policies that prioritized face-to-face contact were meant to ensure that tenants lived up to the state's own expectations of "respectable" living. Council housing symbolized a social contract between workers and the state, one that entitled working-class citizens to housing in return for their contributions to the system.

By the 1980s, the postwar consensus had come thoroughly under attack. New configurations of the state, markets, and public-private partnerships began to appear across much of the world, variously described as structural adjustment, privatization, neoliberalization, and, most recently, austerity measures. In Britain, these changes resulted in the dismantling of the council housing sector because the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher saw dependence on the welfare state as a burden on society. In 1980, Thatcher introduced a "right to buy" policy, which allowed sitting tenants to buy their houses at below market value. This set off processes of social polarization as the more desirable, centrally located council estates soon became owner-occupied, while inferior, outlying estates often remained dominated by social-housing tenancies (Harvey 2005). The management of the latter have been increasingly outsourced to housing associations, which are private organizations that provide low-cost housing. But because there is no sufficient social housing for all those in need, citizens are also pushed into the private rental market, where many live in

formerly state-owned housing that is now owned and managed (and often neglected) by private landlords.

Park End has been deeply affected by these changes. Originally built to house a workforce at a local car factory, the estate was inhabited in the early days by white working-class families, but there was always in addition a sizable minority of residents of Afro-Caribbean descent who came over in the 1960s. Today, the estate counts as one of the most deprived neighborhoods in the country. Since the 1980s, vulnerable tenants have moved to the estate, including single mothers, the long-term unemployed, and those on emergency housing lists. Park End has also experienced an influx of other migrants, largely from Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Meanwhile, established residents have had to come to terms with their own exposure to unemployment as the factory has shrunk to a fraction of its original size. In short, the composition of residents has changed dramatically compared to the relatively homogenous and affluent working-class families of the postwar decades, as in the case of many other council estates in the country.

While, in the early days, Afro-Caribbean immigrants were thought of as outsiders and exposed to institutional and everyday racism (Evans 2012), strong networks of support and care today cut across any simplistic social categories of insiders and outsiders. These networks continue to support the criteria of what makes a “good person”—that is, someone who demonstrates

“connectedness” to people and a place through claims of knowing (Degnen 2013; Edwards 2000; Tyler 2015). For example, as a German Korean who had been living in the United Kingdom for less than half a decade at the time, I could not have been any more “foreign” when I first arrived. It was only over time—by volunteering, living in the estate, and being enmeshed in the daily give-and-take of friendship networks—that I came to be accepted by my interlocutors as “one of us” and someone who was trusted to “know” about local people and was in turn entrusted with local knowledge. My own personhood in the eyes of others was contingent on these claims of knowing. But how do such understandings become connected to politics, and electoral processes more specifically? And what role does Brexit occupy in this context?

## [h1]Citizenship as punishment

[ni]From the southeastern town of Margate (Balthazar 2017) to Manchester (Smith 2012), citizens who refer to themselves as working class express deep-seated frustrations with government. Citizens form their views about government, and indeed democracy, through their daily experiences with the state, as argued by political theorists Amy Lerman and Vesla Weaver (2014), in their work on the US criminal justice system. In the case of Park End, state officials whom residents encounter on a routine basis represent the antithesis of ordinary sociality. Men find that police closely monitor their

movements and often stop and search them, arrest them, and issue them injunction orders (Koch, forthcoming). Women tend to be in closer contact with representatives of the welfare state, including social workers, benefits officers, housing officials, and local government officials (Koch 2015). Yet they have to jump hurdles, undergo assessments, and fill in endless forms, exposing them to a Kafkaesque welfare bureaucracy (Forbess and James 2014). Women live in fear of making mistakes and suffering the consequences of being caught: welfare agents can stop benefit payments, housing authorities evict tenants from their homes, and social services move children into foster care.

Since 2010 matters have only worsened. Under the label of austerity, governments have implemented drastic public-sector cuts. Take the example of Pat Williams, a 59-year-old woman I met while researching a policy known as the bedroom tax, which penalizes social-housing tenants who, according to the state, “underoccupy” their homes. It affected over half a million citizens in 2013. Pat had been living alone in a two-bedroom council flat since her husband died and her adult son left home. She had been permanently signed off work because of a brain hemorrhage and thus received state welfare. The council had cut 14 percent of her housing benefit payments for having a spare bedroom. No matter how puritan a lifestyle she maintained, Pat could not make up for the shortfall; she had fallen into rent arrears and was facing the prospect of eviction. “It’s like a punishment, the

bedroom tax, imposed on working-class people on top of everything else,” she said. For Pat, as for other residents (albeit for different reasons), citizenship was punitive; it was about telling people off, catching them out, and keeping them in line.

In recent elections, voter turnout on Park End has been low, falling below 20 percent in local elections. When asked why they did not want to vote, residents told me there was no point. “Democracy means nothing when you’re uneducated and poor,” a man in his 50s once said to me. Indeed, withdrawal from voting became a morally justified response, one that allowed residents to protect themselves from the intrusion of those one did not trust (Koch 2016). “People feel let down. They want change and they want it now,” said Brian, a white English man in his 50s. For almost a decade, Brian’s next-door neighbor had been turning his life into “hell” by being noisy day and night. As a result, Brian was severely sleep deprived, which aggravated his preexisting back pain and required him to sign off from work. None of the authorities had helped him deal with the problem, and he lacked the money to give up his socially rented house and move away. Brian had not voted in any general elections for years. When I once asked him why he did not vote, he had shrugged and replied, “What’s the point? It won’t make a difference to my life.”

But the referendum on leaving the European Union was different for Brian. Brian had voted Leave on this occasion because he perceived it as an

opportunity to express his frustrations and articulate his demand for change. He was not alone. Tracey, a mother and grandmother of Afro-Caribbean descent in her early 40s, had also voted in favor of leaving. For some years, Tracey had run the estate's community center as an informal drop-in center until the local authority, which owned the building, replaced her one day with a council employee. Tracey had never gone back to the community center and was now working as a cashier in a big supermarket. The loss of the community center had been painful, not just for Tracey but for others who relied on her services. Tracey's opinion on Brexit was that "it's best for the country right now, no matter what happens now." When I expressed my own reservations about this opinion to her, she advised me to watch the official video sponsored by Leave campaigners on YouTube because it showed "what politics is really about."

For Tracey, the Leave campaign provided a "critical juncture" (Kalb 2009) that allowed her to link her own frustrations to larger narratives in a context wherein alternatives were absent. These frustrations were furnished by her and other residents' daily experiences of dealing with hostile and unresponsive authorities—with housing officials, local authorities, and politicians who did not seem to care. What made the referendum different from an ordinary election was that residents like Tracey and Brian perceived it as an opportunity to say no to these authorities and to politicians in Westminster and Brussels. This was evident in the opinions expressed online

by Trisha, a mother of two mixed white and Afro-Caribbean children, who had voted Leave. The day after the referendum, she posted on social media, "Am I a racist? No! Am I thick? No! Am I ignorant? No! Did I do some research? Yes! Have I watched hours and hours of debates? Yes! Did I vote out? Yes! It's my opinion and my vote!" The post continued, "What's done is done. Let's try and work together to make our country, schools, housing, hospitals, communities etc a better place for all of us to live in." Her comment was liked by almost 100 people, who sent Trisha hugs and kisses and thanked her for her wise words.

## [h1]Moralizing politics

[ni]According to the culture-war explanations that have dominated the debate on the EU referendum (and Trump's electoral victory in the United States), the Brexit result is evidence that identity-based politics is hardening. In this view, the referendum was an opportunity for both sides of the vote to express and cement their values. There is no doubt that sentiments of solidarity or antipathy for immigrants featured in the public debate on both sides of the Atlantic (Gusterson 2017). Specific policy demands for, say, "more" or "less" European integration were important to UK campaigns and representations in both the liberal media and the tabloid press. What is more, the ethnographic data discussed here confirms that citizens were engaged in the campaign and paid attention to what the media

were saying. A call for “more local control,” populated by Leave campaigners, for example, acted as a shorthand for at least some voters to make sense of their frustrations and ambitions.

But to reduce the election result to identity politics is to misrecognize that citizens’ engagements with Brexit also constitute attempts to insert everyday moralities and expectations into the running of electoral politics. Many of my interlocutors saw Brexit as a chance to reject government tout court and to say no to a system of representative democracy that many have come to experience in punitive terms. They attached to the vote hopes and expectations that were born out of their daily experiences of being neglected and left out. Of course, these experiences are partial and locally specific. But the anger and passion that have been unleashed by the referendum indicate that Brexit was a cataclysmic moment for many citizens to articulate a host of frustrations and possibilities that go far beyond any questions of the European Union. This was the case not only for those who voted in favor of leaving but also for those who voted to remain (Knight 2017).

It is in this light that citizens’ engagements with voting focuses analytic attention on a set of questions that have not often been asked. What kinds of contested and partial imaginaries were attached to the vote? How are these imaginaries grounded in specific life experiences, struggles, and expectations on either side of the split? And can the anger and passion

that the referendum result has unleashed be channeled into new kinds of projects and public goods that are currently not part of the official discourse and decision-making processes? Asking these questions shifts the focus beyond finger-pointing to a substantive discussion about what kind of society and politics are desirable. It also helps to embrace the uncertainty that has taken hold in the aftermath of the referendum, an uncertainty that figures not as a threat but as a space that is up for grabs and experimentation. And perhaps most importantly, it can provide an opening to alternative, if yet unknown, futures that transcend any singular narrative of Leavers versus Remainers and the politics of division that this implies.

## [h1]Notes

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1. The franchise was the same for the EU referendum as for the last general election, but with the addition of peers and citizens of Gibraltar.

2. I have used pseudonyms for the names of people and places.

3. The idiom of “culture wars” has been less salient in the United States than in the United Kingdom, despite its significance in the recent past.

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