Brexit as postindustrial critique

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Abstract

Anthropologists and other commentators struggle to make sense of pre-COVID-19 political developments in the postindustrial Global North. Various narratives were created to explain these dramatic events and changes, deploying an armory of social science analysis. We could approach one of these worrying developments, Brexit, as a postindustrial phenomenon. To make this case, I will compare my ethnographic material from postindustrial German cities with my experience in North East England as a non-UK, EU citizen. I argue that Brexit is not just a delayed response to economic decline and insecurity, epitomized in the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent times of austerity. Rather, Brexit indicates that the former industrialized countries of the Global North have not yet redefined their political and economic organization. Further, they have not developed an idea of what life after the postindustrial crisis can look like. I show that anthropology can contribute to precisely this kind of future-thinking.

Keywords

Brexit; future; postindustrial; East Germany; EU

Amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic, mentioning Brexit feels incongruous—an issue belonging to a distant era. Yet Brexit has not gone away and, sooner or later, it will be back on our plates. That is why we should continue to prepare for it. To reflect on Brexit, I will follow anthropological tradition and start with a few vignettes. These vignettes are

stereotypically pessimistic, as are many expert and academic analyses of the Brexit phenomenon, and they do not serve to guide the reader into a well-studied ethnographic field. They will remain partial to my experiences. They take us back before the current crisis, into late 2019. One concerns a friend, the others myself. We are both non-UK, EU citizens working at Durham University. We both live near Durham, a city in North East England. This postindustrial region was amongst the first to vote Leave in the 2016 referendum, even though it was likely to be amongst those hardest hit by Britain's exit from the European Union, given the amount of EU funding it currently receives.

My friend Anna and I were both born in Berlin, Germany: she in West Berlin, I in the East. Anna partly grew up in Switzerland. In the autumn of 2019, when most UK newspapers were still dominated by the aftermath of the 2016 referendum, Anna took a taxi from Durham city to her home in a nearby former mining village. Her mother called her halfway, and the two spoke shortly on the phone, most probably in German, potentially some of it in Swiss German. Suddenly the taxi driver stopped and told Anna to get out. He was not taking any Polish people in his taxi, he said. Anna shrugged this off, and walked home. Still, this taxi driver's doubly misguided xenophobia, adverse to his own economic interest, shocked her friends and colleagues. This comparatively insignificant event is indicative of what some UK nationals think about EU immigrants, and their right to live and work in the UK. What had happened to the solidarity of the North East, which still prides itself for its passionate fight against Thatcher's neoliberal reforms of the welfare state during the 1980s miners' strike? How came it that in the December 2019 UK General Election the former Labour strongholds referred to as the "Red Wall" disintegrated and turned blue, voting for the Conservatives and their slogan "Get Brexit Done"?

UK academics voted overwhelmingly to Remain, which perhaps contributed to the shock amongst my Durham colleagues at the election results. Although nothing like Anna's

incident happened to me, I found I had unconsciously developed an eerie sense of caution and fear, a feeling of being different, something that privileged EU immigrants like myself had rarely felt before—all Hitler jokes aside. This feeling of being different, of not belonging any more, was also evoked in moments that were meant to be helpful rather than insulting. For example, the UK government tested its EU settlement scheme at many UK universities, and Durham University began implementing this by arranging a meeting for its non-UK, EU employees. The invitation email had felt bad enough, but when we all turned up at this meeting, we felt even more awkward, as if we were being picked out. The new reality of a segregated Brexit future was materializing. Against our will, our existence in the UK had been rendered problematic.

I especially notice my new caution whenever I take the train further north from Durham, and cross the border to Scotland. Once over this intranational border, my body relaxes. I am not as much on edge anymore. Knowing that Scotland largely voted to remain in the EU allows me to let my guard down. There seem to be more EU immigrants in Edinburgh and other parts of Scotland—you hear their (sometimes strong) Scottish-European accents. Back in Durham, I am less at ease with public interactions. People often ask where my accent is from, and I cannot hear that question innocently anymore. Every joke, however benevolent in tone, I cannot but put into a context that I dramatize more than the person making the joke. But why do I feel, and thereby reproduce, the difference invoked and to a certain extent reinvented by the Brexiteers? And how else could I approach my potentially Leave-voting neighbors here in England's postindustrial North East?

The last time I had such a profound feeling of caution was as a young boy, at another time of rupture: after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and Germany's subsequent reunification in 1990. On my family's return from our 1991, first-ever holiday in Western Europe, ironically allowed by an earlier form of the EU's freedom of mobility, we had

stopped in Frankfurt am Main to meet my father's West German pen pal. We made the mistake of parking near the main train station, and everything state socialism had warned us about Western capitalism was there: homelessness, begging, prostitution, drugs. My older sister started crying. I became silent. We left once my father realized we would not relax again in the foreseeable future. Only after we crossed the former inner-German border did we relax in the knowledge of being safe again.

The comparison of the experiential aftermath of the peaceful reunification of a formerly divided Germany with the projected departure of the UK from the European Union is in many ways farfetched. However, I have added the third, seemingly unrelated vignette for several reasons. First, it allows me to make a further argument about my own experience of the aftermath of Brexit. For an East Berliner like myself, and for many Eastern and other Europeans of my generation, the post-Cold War experience is one of dissolving borders. My life was marked by the aforementioned fall of the Berlin Wall when I was eight years old and by the EU's Eastern enlargement in 2004. Whenever other walls were erected, such as the ones between Israel and Palestine or between the US and Mexico (not to mention the ones around fortress Europe!), I struggled to make sense of them. The result of the Brexit referendum was an affront to my inner convictions against borders despite the fact that there are many and good reasons to be critical of the EU as an organization.

Second, a comparison to the German context might be productive in another way. Unexpected electoral successes for right-wing populist parties are a phenomenon shared around the world, particularly in what was long referred to as the Global North. Neo-nationalist policies are propagated by the Brexit-Tories in the UK, Trump in the US, Orban in Hungary, and the PiS party in Poland. Their German equivalent is the AfD, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany). This right-wing German party celebrated its biggest electoral victories in former socialist East Germany. Statistically, media

commentators are eager to point out, East Germans feel much more drawn to this party's political agenda and personnel. In 2019 state elections in three East German *Länder* (states), the AfD gained more than a quarter of all votes. Its results seemed similar to gains of the Brexit party or Johnson's hard Brexiteer-led Tory party. However, another similarity is that in both cases most media and academic commentators had rendered problematic the irrationality of the seemingly misguided voter groups: those voting for Brexit in the UK and, in the German context, particularly those East Germans who, even if they had not voted for the AfD, still seemed prone to neo-nationalism. I have not read any serious accounts questioning the rationality of Remain voters or non-AfD voting West Germans—but that might be because I am stuck in my own media echo chamber. Even their political opponents, however, do not seem to dispute their reasoning much.

Third, a comparison with the German context might be productive because it allows us to think through the different approaches and contexts we can muster as anthropologists to explore the phenomenon of Brexit. Indeed, as these initial similarities and differences already indicate, there are different ways of making sense of neo-nationalist developments. For a Brexit toolbox, these narratives demand anthropological scrutiny. My proposal is to view Brexit as a postindustrial phenomenon, and not just because East Germany's shock-therapy de-industrialization after reunification lends itself so neatly to this story. The category of the postindustrial allows a whole variety of different approaches to, and conceptualizations of, Brexit, from culturalist to political economy ones. However, it has its own temporal ramifications—not just with regards to the past, but also to the future (compare Anderson and Wilson 2018; Anderson et al. 2019). I will get back to these temporal issues at the end of this piece. Let me now unpack the different approaches that come to light when comparing commentaries to neo-nationalisms in the UK and Germany.

In the UK, commentators frequently muse on the motivations of Leave voters. They usually start from a lack of understanding. Whether media journalists or (younger) family members, they all face the problem that they cannot comprehend exactly why one would want to leave the EU. I, too, have often lost track of what the whole thing was about and I struggled to decipher the vehemence and rigor with which outspoken Brexiteers condemned the EU and their political opponents. The question of truth in populism arose for me: do these Brexiteers actually believe in what they are arguing for, or are their often absurd claims only a tool to gain power, with other motives in mind? Indeed, if they were frank about the true motivations behind their schemes, I could take them more seriously. However, in the UK, even many Remain voters seem to have no idea about how the EU actually works, and the limits of its power. So what was the whole drama about?

In the German case, by contrast, the problematization of voters' motivation to vote for neo-nationalist populists was fully regionalized (although, again, in the UK, Brexit seemed to be very much an English and Welsh preoccupation, too, since, like Scotland, the majority in Northern Ireland has also voted for Remain). The fewer West German AfD voters could easily be categorized as disappointed conservatives. In contrast, the media was obsessed with the comparatively more East German AfD voters. Particularly around the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 2019, media exegeses were investigating the East German soul. The framework deployed was most often a culturalist one. Even though three decades had already passed since the demise of state socialism, the statistical affinity of East German voters to the AfD was seen as a legacy of socialism, a wish for a return to an authoritarian party state and an expression of an enduring innate xenophobia, all conceptualized as a matter of an East German mentality. Predominantly West German AfD politicians heavily exploited this idea in the 2019 East German state elections. They used slogans reminiscent of the 1989 peaceful revolution such as "Complete the Revolution!"

(*Vollenende die Wende!*), "Then as Now: Freedom Instead of Socialism!" (*Damals wie heute: Freiheit statt Sozialismus!*), and "The East Rises!" (*Der Osten steht auf!*), evoking a "Turn 2.0" (*Wende 2.0*) and, in a rhetoric similar to the Leave and Trump campaigns, arguing to "Take Back Your Country" (*Hol Dir Dein Land Zurück!*). They also styled themselves as a protest party, through which those who feel left behind can finally show the established "political elite" (West Germans associated with Brussels, but never Westminster, if put in the UK's terms) what they really think.

Some journalists blamed the failed reunification that had reduced East Germans to politically and economically "second-class citizens" (*Bürger zweiter Klasse*); others drew attention to the fact that, economically, the East German *Länder* were actually doing quite well, with low unemployment and rising income levels. The more than two-thirds of the East German electorate who voted for other parties did not disturb the all-encompassing cultural logic of these debates. Similar postsocialist arguments were proposed for explaining right-wing electoral successes all over Eastern Europe, but all of them ultimately failed to define the present moment because their cultural essentialism and historical determinism fell short of seeing these electoral choices as a form of critique or agency (compare Mair 2017).

Some more complex accounts evoked the historical context of the recent crises, including the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 so-called European refugee crisis, explaining recent expressions of discontent as a somewhat delayed response to these crises. Indeed, East Germans, Eastern Europeans, and Brexit voters alike were usually depicted as the victims of globalization (epitomized in the financial crisis), who have not only lost their jobs, but whose livelihoods, stretched by austerity (implemented in the aftermath of the very same crisis), were then threatened by migrants and refugees (in 2015), who were seen to overwhelm whatever remained of the welfare state in each national setting.

Forms of historical and cultural contextualization in these more complex accounts mirror what anthropologists have tentatively deployed for making sense of the 2016 Brexit vote or its similarly discouraging twin vote in the US presidential election later in the same year. In Green et al.'s timely 2016 Forum on Brexit in *Social Anthropology*, many colleagues have already deciphered the referendum result as a critique of the failures of postindustrial (as in, neoliberal) capitalism. However, as anthropologists we are obviously rather uncomfortable with explaining simple voting behaviors, patterns, or results in the first place. Even any retrospective judgment on Brexit would always involve more empirical work first, and there are many research projects on the way.[1] But what kind of ethnographic object (or objects) is Brexit and how are we to study it? Or rather, how can I learn to understand those who voted for Brexit across my critical distance?

With the comparison to East Germany, I have had to reject outright culturalist and historically deterministic readings of Brexit phenomena. As an East German, I feel offended when people reduce me or other East Germans to a certain East German culture and thereby limit their and my agency. In the UK setting, such approaches also fail. The formerly proud miners and energy workers (at least that is what they would have been called in socialist East Germany) of the English North East are not culturally determined to be anti-European, and not all old and less educated white English men are born Brexiteers (as some analyses suggest). As Felix Stein (2016) underlined early on after the Brexit vote, simple economic reasoning does not translate neatly into voting behavior either. From a political perspective, Brexit was also the surprisingly successful project of a few right-wing politicians and media magnates. This, in turn, does not mean, as John Mair (2017) convincingly argued, that people were brainwashed, and could not resist their lies. The motivations of Brexit voters may be

1. See, for instance, one on belonging, identity and media: https://www.brexitandbelonging.org

more complex than the simple ballot choices they had to relate to. So is anthropology bound to fail in providing an analysis of Brexit because we refuse to reduce people to their electoral choices? Or will we get lost in its complexity as a political, economic, and cultural phenomenon that overwhelms our current analytical apparatus?

One of the ideas uniting current commentaries is that Brexit is an expression of discontent with the current situation. Even non-Leave voters share hope for change, whether they hope for some more of an old-fashioned welfare state or aspire to something totally different in the future. My gut feeling is—and a lot of scholars of affect seem to share this (for one example, Berlant 2011)—that Brexit and other expressions of neo-nationalism need to be approached as postindustrial phenomena. More specifically, they can be seen as a form of postindustrial critique. However, I am less interested in the "post," which simply helps to extrapolate the social and cultural enormity of the decline of industrial life. Indeed, the recent changes in economic and social organization of societies of the Global North had severe repercussions. They produced winners and losers, but they shook the fundamental beliefs and convictions of most. My work in German postindustrial cities speaks to this (for example, Ringel 2018a). People in these places, most of them on the losing end of new political economies, have had to redefine what makes a good life in the first place. They also had to renegotiate their relations to time in general and to the future more specifically (Guyer 2007).

However, to avoid all determinism (postindustrial crises do not necessarily lead to neo-nationalism!), I propose that "the postindustrial" could not only be understood as a reference to the severity of the changes that have happened since at least the 1980s and in most parts of the world. What the recent years and decades, to a certain extent, have fostered, is less a feeling of nostalgia for the industrial era. Life was hard during Cold War times, too, and industries exuded their own toxicities and adverse effects on human health and sociality. Rather, the postindustrial era has helped to cultivate amongst many the urge for new

securities. This era can then be defined less by what it is "post" to, than by a different prefix, one that captures anticipation. Unfortunately, we simply lack a mode of expressing something era-defining with a "pre-". However, this is what I have in mind—the problem with Brexit, and the motivations that lead to the result of the 2016 referendum, as human geographers and sociologists have pointed out, have much to do with the future (Anderson et al. 2019). And I argue that anthropologists should take up the challenge of unpacking these futures, too (see, for example, Bryant and Knight 2019).

Why not include all things futural in our analyses, not just in order to avoid culturalist and deterministic approaches? In the context of the so-called European refugee crisis, I have proposed one possible format of doing this: "ethnographic prospects" (Ringel 2018b). I argued that we should look ahead with our informants to the future *after* the crisis as well as exploring the futures that continue to emerge during it. For that we should consciously deploy the two most important tools we bring to this exercise: comparisons to other times and places and an attention to detail. Indeed, how could and should the postindustrial future—a future both Leave and Remain voters aspire to—look? How should postindustrial societies organize their social, economic and political relations? What makes a good life in the postindustrial era, and which institutions can help sustain it? Anthropologists may not be adept at unpacking voting results (because we cherish complexity, not the relative simplicity of statistics), but we are trained to contextualize phenomena. Brexit may be a delayed response to the recent crises of neoliberal capitalism, but what future contexts should we embed it in, too? What are the many future concerns, hopes, and fears in which Brexit was and will be reproduced and renegotiated? We might need less a view from the past to explain Brexit, and more of an attention to the future hopes and fears it expressed and evoked.

Some might argue that taking Brexit voters (and AfD-voting East Germans) seriously as voicing a form of critique of the present prevents us from also engaging critically with

their loud racist and xenophobic undertones. These things are not mutually exclusive. Similarly, some might think we cannot embark on scrutinizing the postindustrial future without working through the demise of the industrial past. In East Germany, for example, there are many recent examples of this quintessentially German exercise of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a working through the past. Only now are people critically assessing the downfalls of reunification across the board. Many commentators particularly scrutinize the history of the *Treuhandanstalt*, the organization in charge of the former GDR's almost wholesale de-industrialization—that is, the privatization (and often liquidation) of the previously state-owned (*volkseigen*) East German industrial combines, businesses, and factories. However, a serious debate about Margaret Thatcher's (and later, under New Labour, Tony Blair's) efforts in neo-liberalization, and the sociocultural consequences on the lives of people throughout the UK, would not replace what is much more necessary: a discussion about what the postindustrial future should look like.

For many people, including Anna and me, this future can still include the UK's membership in the EU (hopefully a thoroughly reformed EU). Although it hurts me to want to take the aforementioned taxi driver's xenophobia seriously as a form of postindustrial critique, I still see it as my job as an anthropologist to engage with his beliefs and worldviews. I can still call him a racist *after* I have found out what he thinks and why he believes in Brexit, and I do not have to reduce him to a "stupid Northerner" brainwashed by Boris Johnson and the like. There may even be something he and I can agree upon, something we wish for in the future, that might politically unite us.

Anthropology has tools at its disposal to engage with contemporary situations and their complex nature. As usual, the discipline will have to scrutinize its own preconceptions when approaching Brexit as a cultural, political, and/or economic phenomenon. However, it will also have to scrutinize its own expectations, political and otherwise, for what the result

and aftermath of the Brexit referendum should have been like. The shock most of us experienced refers to a failure of these expectations. We have to engage critically with postindustrial forms of capitalism, but also explore the many postindustrial futures our interlocutors engage with in their professional and personal lives. Finally, we should offer our forms of critique of the present in response to what other people have to say about the current situation, and formally engage in the many participatory and inclusive processes that make up a democracy. Arguably, the actual British exit from the EU has not even happened yet (as we sit in an impasse of a transitional period and apocalyptic trance). As a "pre-" phenomenon, it should give us reason enough to work through the future and push our own agenda for what that future, as Brexit or not, could and should look like in detail. There is one last benefit of a focus on futures.

In the week of the UK's nominal departure from the EU, on 31 January 2020 I taught one of my third-year undergraduate classes on the topic of "Capitalism in Ruins." In anticipation of the UK's exit, I added some deep-felt sense of sadness and despair to my usual feeling of caution. I mentioned as much to my students in a vague, throw-away remark at the beginning of class about this not being a good week and my hope they would get well through the coming Friday. They struggled to get the reference. The actual Brexit, whose planned official celebrations in Downing Street and elsewhere had already deeply upset me, suddenly appeared in this short interaction as a non-event. Sure, the real changes would hit these students later, but it was their future opportunities that were being restricted on that Friday. Was I emotionally overreacting? I found their tepid, sober response to the actual day of Brexit frightening. We must continue to force proponents of Brexit to lay out the future they promise in detail—the better to hold them to account afterwards. And this scrutiny will be needed very soon.

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