Brexit, Europe and Anthropology: time to say something

written by Sarah Green
July, 2016

Introduction (by **Sarah Green**)

Brexit means trouble, that is for certain; what is less certain is what kind of trouble. Some might sympathise with the immediate response of **Chris Gregory** (ANU):

"I guess like most people I am totally bewildered by it all. Is it a major political

and economic upheaval or will it be a minor blip in the madness that is 'business as usual' these days? My gut feeling is that the politics of inequality is catching up with the economics of inequality and that the 99% are giving voice to grievances that the hard right are exploiting to the nth degree."

As the co-editor of *Social Anthropology/Athropologie Sociale,* the [European Association of Social Anthropologists](#)' journal (and coincidentally a British citizen who lives in Finland), I felt a responsibility to provide a forum for anthropologists to respond.

> *Brexit concerns the state of Europe today; it concerns deeply divisive social, economic and political issues – the kinds of issues that anthropologists work hard to understand in social and cultural terms; and it is about precarity. Perhaps more than anything else, it is about precarity.*

Twenty-eight anthropologists were asked to give their immediate – spontaneous, raw, unpolished – responses to Brexit, two days after the result came out. They all generated those responses (a total of 24 texts, as some were co-authored) in less than five days after the result. The full set of commentaries, which provide a remarkably comprehensive analysis of the Brexit phenomenon and its possible implications from an anthropological perspective, will be published on Early View on the *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* website, by mid-July. The contributors to the full collection are:

[Ruben Andersson](#) (LSE and Stockholm); [Pamela Ballinger](#) (Michigan); [Niko Besnier](#), [Daniel Guinness](#) & [Mark Hann](#) (Amsterdam); [Čarna Brković](#) (Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg); [Salih Can Açıksöz](#) (UCLA) & [Umut Yıldırım](#) (Bogazici); [Michael Carrithers](#) (Durham); [Jane Cowan](#) (Sussex); [Olga Demetriou](#) (PRIO, Cyprus); [Dace Dzenovska](#) (Oxford); [Thomas Hylland Eriksen](#) (Oslo), Andre Gingrich (Austrian Academy of Sciences); [Chris Gregory](#) (ANU); [Michael Herzfeld](#) (Harvard); [Douglas Holmes](#) (Binghamton, SUNY); [Insa Koch](#) (LSE); [Stef Jansen](#) (Manchester); [Casper Brunn Jensen](#) (Osaka); [Sharon Macdonald](#) (Humboldt); [Keir Martin](#) (Oslo); Georgos Poulimenakos &

[Dimitris Dalakoglou](#) (Vrije University Amsterdam); [Madeleine Reeves](#) (Manchester); [Cris Shore](#) (Auckland); [Marilyn Strathern](#) (Cambridge); and [Thomas Wilson](#) (Binghamton, SUNY).

As we needed to get something out as quickly as possible, we are joining with Allegra to provide a taste of what is contained in the full Forum. The texts are not the full texts which appear in the Forum, but have been edited down to keep them brief. Please check the journal's [website](#) around July 15th for the full version.

Extracts from the *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale's* special Forum on Brexit:

[Dace Dzenovska](#) is Associate Professor in Anthropology of Migration at the University of Oxford. She holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include postsocialist democratization, nationalism, the state, sovereignty, migration, and political imagination. She is completing two book manuscripts. The Great Departure: Staying and Leaving After Postsocialism, forthcoming with Berghahn Books, is an ethnography of Latvian outmigration from the perspective of those who stay behind. Complicit Becoming: Tolerance Work and Europeanization After Socialism is an ethnography of lessons in political liberalism in the context of postsocialist democratization in Latvia.

It was a joyful moment when Latvia declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1990. No more directives from Moscow, the future was clear: a national state integrated into the European Union and NATO. Today, less than two decades after independence, hit by massive financial crisis and exhausted by austerity measures, many of Latvia's residents have sought livelihoods abroad. Nothing

that the national(ist) state did to "take back the country" in the form of restrictive citizenship and language policies could put bread on the table and prevent people from leaving.

I am writing this from a small town in northeast England, where being a Latvian citizen can be unpleasant at times. This town voted overwhelmingly for leaving the European Union. Many use only one word to explain it: immigration. Indeed, this agricultural and food processing area has experienced significant labour migration from Eastern Europe. The rest is almost textbook material: farm managers say that migrants work hard, while local inhabitants say that migrants take away their jobs, that they cannot get a doctor's appointment, that the town has changed beyond recognition, and that the locals are accused of being racists when they try to make their voices heard. The employers who profit from migrant labour and the property owners who drive up housing prices are elusive and invisible. Reports about urgent social policy issues disappear in bureaucratic corridors. Long history of labour exploitation is slipping from memory. "People compare themselves to others, they don't think historically," says a local historian.

Making a place feel English will not address the grievances that people in this town have. Nationalism certainly did not address the grievances of those Latvians who, despite their love for the nation, are working in English fields and factories. "Taking back control" might seem like an attractive illusion, but inhabitants of this town are convinced: "we've done it before, we can do it again". It is not yet clear to me how local inhabitants understand their place in the world. It is difficult, at times, to get beyond the soundbites that various entrepreneurs of voice have used to amplify local grievances to the point of rupture.

But it is the task of anthropology to understand how people form their understandings of the world and of themselves in it. For that, it is crucial to bracket anthropology's desire to connect local understandings with familiar critiques of power and political ideologies.

Stef Jansen is a social anthropologist whose ethnographic investigations in the post-Yugoslav states aim to contribute to the critical study of post-Cold War transformations of home and hope, with a particular focus on the role of statecraft. Senior Lecturer at the University of Manchester (UK), he has recently authored Yearnings in the Meantime: 'Normal Lives' and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex and co-edited, with Čarna Brković and Vanja Čelebičić, Negotiating Social Relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Semiperipheral Entanglements. He is currently conducting a study of life between two outer EU borders in a small town in Herzegovina.

I followed the referendum in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where, in the same period, we were bombarded with news items about a deadline billed as BiH's 'last chance'. In BiH, everyone knows that every last chance (again) concerns BiH's chances of obtaining EU candidate status. And a vast majority of people in BiH do support future EU membership. My research suggests that they do so at least partly for similar reasons that led some sections of the (working class) electorate in post-industrial areas of England vote for Brexit. These reasons congeal around something we could call post-Fordist affect. In BiH as in the UK, many consider themselves to have been robbed of their futures. They feel abandoned on the crossroads of downward social mobility, war losses and post-Cold War geopolitical transformations. They cast this against the promises of the former Yugoslav socialist welfare state. Twenty-five years after its demise, EU accession is widely seen as a way of at least partly putting their country 'in order', something that, it is believed, cannot be left to domestic politicians. Whenever asked about my prediction about Brexit, my answer that it might well be on the cards was

therefore usually met with consternation.

Widespread support for EU accession does not entail general imaginings of the EU as a land of milk and honey. Also, impatience to join is generally tempered by cynicism about the realpolitik of accession decisions. Nevertheless, few people in BiH believe joining the EU will make things *worse*.

So it seems that post-Fordist affect may be one factor feeding support for leaving the EU amongst some people in North-West Europe (and not only in England) *and* feeding support for joining the EU amongst other people in South-East Europe. This raises a key question: how can promises associated with the welfare state—despite all the available evidence of its oppressive, exclusive 'normalising' tendencies, despite its Cold War function as a corporatist structure of domination, despite its 'cruel optimism'; and despite the fact that even its promises only marked a little blip in human history—remain such powerful objects of yearning for many people across the continent?

And, yes, that continent includes the islands at its North-Western end.

[Jane K. Cowan](#) is an anthropologist whose research interests include gender, power, the body, performance, culture and rights, history and international institutions, with regional expertise in Greece and the Balkans. She received a Ph.D. from Indiana University and is now Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sussex in Brighton, England. She is the author of Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece and co-editor of Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives. She is currently working on a project that examines the intersection

of rights talk, ritual performance and audit practices at the United Nations Universal Periodic Review, a human rights monitoring mechanism.

For me, the UK referendum story began a year ago with another referendum: that of Greece. Elected in January 2015 on a promise to end austerity, throughout the spring the SYRIZA government was pressured by the Troika (the EU, the European Central Bank and the IMF) to accept ever harsher and ill-targeted cuts to public spending in exchange for the next bailout. Pushed to the limit, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras walked out of negotiations and called a referendum, declaring that Greeks must decide whether they were willing to accept the 'impossible' terms he had been offered. In cafes, in kitchens, standing in queues for the ATM to withdraw their daily maximum of 60 euros cash, Greeks debated: 'yes' or 'no'? As the days passed, the question to which these were possible answers became less clear; a desperate 'yes' campaign claimed it was about choosing to stay in 'Europe' rather than simply the Eurozone, while several European finance ministers threatened that a 'no' would provoke Greece's eviction: Grexit. On referendum day (5th July 2015), Greeks responded defiantly to this attempted blackmail: 62% voted 'No!' and for a week, euphoria reigned. Then, in a tumultuous 24-hour negotiation, Tsipras was 'waterboarded' into accepting a deal even worse than the one his fellow citizens had rejected. Refusal, he judged, was politically impossible: Greeks feel European and at the time, over 80% supported EU membership, whatever the price.

The lesson I took from that scenario was that European finance ministers were all too willing to jettison 'solidarity' and push Greece to the wall with austerity policies that everybody knew from the start simply do not work. Neoliberalism easily trumped Social Europe; SYRIZA's alternative path would not be tolerated. The other component of the so-called 'Greek crisis' has been, in the words of Dimitris Christopoulos, a 'reception crisis' for Europe, not a 'refugee crisis'. With a few honourable exceptions, EU member governments have preferred to keep refugees out, or keep them corralled in Greece and Italy, rather than to offer them hospitality.

I'm hardly starry-eyed about the EU. It badly needs reform. But I have been persuaded that the 'critical in' position of much of the European Left, advocating for a People's Europe and mobilizing for democratic reform from below, is our best hope.

Niko Besnier *directs the European Research Council-funded project "Globalization, Sport, and the Precarity of Masculinity" (GLOBALSPORT) project based at the University of Amsterdam, where he is currently Professor of Cultural Anthropology. He has previously taught at institutions in the US, New Zealand, and Japan.*

Daniel Guinness *is a postdoctoral fellow in the GLOBALSPORT project based in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He received his DPhil from Oxford University. His fieldwork follows the trajectories of aspiring rugby players in Fiji and Argentina, paying particular attention to masculinity, mobility, and religious practices.*

Mark Hann *is a doctoral candidate in the GLOBALSPORT project based in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. His fieldwork follows the trajectories of aspiring footballers and wrestlers in Dakar, Senegal, which pays particular attention to masculinity, mobility, and magico-religious practices.*

The day after the Brexit referendum result was announced, the three of us were sitting with a number of senior and retired Fijian migrant rugby players in the home of one of them outside Bordeaux, France, drinking kava and engaging in *talanoa* ('shooting the breeze'). Our host kept returning to the Brexit vote, clearly

worried about its implications for the complicated relationship between Fiji and Britain, its former colonial power. If the United Kingdom was prepared to turn its back on Europe, what would the implications be for the rest of the world in general, and Fijian migrant rugby players in particular?

For some years now, the European rugby professional leagues have represented a crucial source of employment for young Fijian rugby talent and, in Fiji, a major source of income for families, villages and the nation. Visa regulations have always represented a major barrier to aspirational players, and even France-based rugby professionals must make the time-consuming journey to Paris to apply for a visa before each match in the UK. With the UK's sports industry deeply connected to Europe, any shift away from a single market is likely to have a profound effect on career opportunities.

Our host in Bordeaux framed the issue in the more complicated context of the pre-Brexit protectionist policies that had an adverse impact on Fijians serving in the British military. Fijian soldiers have long been seen by the British military as malleable, cheap and respectful labour. Heirs to a pre-colonial warrior tradition in their own society, Fijians have served with distinction in successive British military campaigns, from World War II to the Malaya Insurgency to military interventions in the Middle East. Our friend kept pointing out that while Britain happily employed Fijian soldiers in conflicts, returned soldiers find it difficult to gain residency in the UK, and Fijian nationals are often denied visitor's visas to spend time with relatives in Britain. As our host put it 'we've died for them and they won't even give us a 90-day visa'.

We have no idea what Brexit will mean for any of these issues.

Yet if Brexit voters were trying to avoid being embedded in larger structures like the EU and, more generally, globalization, they might be disappointed. Their lives are already too interconnected with the rest of the globe.

[Michael Herzfeld](link) is Ernest E. Monrad Professor of the Social Sciences in the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University, and currently holds visiting appointments at the Universities of Leiden and Melbourne and at Shanghai International Studies University. An advocate of 'engaged anthropology', he has conducted research in Greece, Italy, and Thailand on masculinity, artisanship and social knowledge, gentrification and the impact of historical conservation, nationalism, and bureaucracy. Author of eleven books — including Evicted from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome (2009) and Siege of the Spirits: Community and Polity in Bangkok (2016) – he has also produced two ethnographic films.

I write from a mountain village in Crete where I have conducted research since 1974. A non-anthropologist might wonder why we should heed Cretan villagers – especially a community that has clashed violently with the law and engaged in the sort of patronage that had the Germans screaming 'corruption!'. But that is just the point. These highly intelligent observers, some of whom have lived abroad, have experienced rough treatment from the European Union, for which, as for Greece's leaders, they now have neither patience nor affection. They also know about hard bargaining and cannot see how any member-state can realistically opt out. They understand the E.U. through their segmentary clan system; feuds are normal, ducking out an act of shameful irresponsibility. Brexit therefore astonishes them. They already 'know' there is no real way out; as one man put it, their government said 'No' in the morning and 'Yes' in the evening – and the British government, he argued, will be forced to do likewise or suffer dire consequences.

A complex power struggle has begun – again, something these agonistic shepherds understand. They know that violent acts like the murder of Jo Cox can

enlarge conflict systemically. Knowing violence intimately, they regard it as ultimately undesirable. Past guest-workers themselves, moreover, they have no fondness for the neo-nazi Golden Dawn, one of several exreme-right parties that immediately saw Brexit as vindicating their anti-immigrant venom, and they seem proud that at a personal level Greeks have generally shown benign attitudes towards refugees and immigrants.

Above all, they understand political disputes as feuds that emerge from the collapse of normative interaction and immediately threaten uncontrollable violence. Both as Greeks in the Civil War and repeatedly as villagers, they have seen it all before. Western European leaders, scared by the novel unpredictability of factionalism and racism, should heed these mountain shepherds' experienced wisdom. That just might be their best chance to retreat from the brink.

[Casper Bruun Jensen](#) is senior researcher at Osaka University and honorary lecturer at Leicester University the author of Ontologies for Developing Things (Sense, 2010) and Monitoring Movements in Development Aid (with Brit Ross Winthereik) (2013, MIT) and the editor of Deleuzian Intersections: Science, Technology, Anthropology with Kjetil Rödje (Berghahn, 2009) and Infrastructures and Social Complexity with Penny Harvey and Atsuro Morita (Routledge, 2016). His present work focuses on environmental infrastructures in the Mekong delta.

In Denmark, the political dynamics are roughly comparable to those of the U.K. The right wing has also taken over. As in post-Brexit discussions, intellectuals take themselves to task – or are taken to task — for failing to add more nuanced

perspectives to the public debate. In fact, though, there *have been* numerous nuanced analyses. Only they do not seem to make any difference. They showed, for example, that the turn to the right is a reaction to the precariousness of life in many parts of the country. They called, over and over, for addressing the increasing imbalance between a few large cities and the countryside. They repeatedly argued that failure to address these issues might well translate into a hatred of foreigners and the EU far from unknown, the general shape of the problems is almost crystal clear. It's not that intellectuals have not made their calls but that there is no one on the other end to pick up the phone. Neither in the EU nor in the UK have we seen the emergence of any alternative agendas for the making of common and sustainable worlds.

The pluralist notion that providing anthropological, or any kind of intellectual, nuance, contributes to a more informed and coherent whole understanding does not hold.

Informed analyses do not inform, because they are ignored, or else they are refracted beyond recognition, typically to be fed back *as* versions of the same reductive ideological parameters they were meant to nuance in the first place — as exemplified in the Brexit campaign. The problem for intellectuals today is how to operate in a postplural landscape of politics and knowledge.

Photo by Thomas Hawk (flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0)