



Clashing scales of Brexit

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

July, 2016



Mainstream newspapers, politicians and commentators across Europe instantly expressed dejection and bitterness in the face of the Brexit outcome, and avid Brexiteers have typically been portrayed as xenophobes and bigots, Little Englanders or foolish opportunists incapable of understanding the dangerous ramifications and likely Domino effects of their choice. This view is overbearing and inaccurate: complaints about Brussels may be perfectly legitimate, and it is thought-provoking that only right-wing populists have been able to listen to them. As a matter of fact, Brexiteers come in different shades, including leftists and radical humanists who are disappointed with the total marketisation of Europe,



alienating standardisation resulting from centralism and the failure to deal with the refugee crisis in a coordinated, dignified and humane way. ([Jan Blommaert](#) has written well about this.) Besides, a different perspective may be more enlightening and constructive, not only in shedding light on Brexit, but also in identifying common denominators to more encompassing crises of legitimacy experienced by political and economic elites in the North Atlantic world.

In evolutionary theory, a major transition takes place when smaller entities combine to form an entity at a higher level, relinquishing their autonomy for the greater good. The transition from single-cell to multicellular organisms is the clearest example, leading to increased diversification, total interdependency and a sharp division of labour.

The European Union holds out a similar promise; by combining at a higher level, member states will profit from the expansion of their system boundaries, enabling them to do what they do best. The disgruntlement with Brussels witnessed in the British referendum (and elsewhere in Europe, mind you) results from weaknesses and failures in the practical implementation of this logic, expressed through an increased distance between power holders and their constituencies, what I propose to call a clash of scales.

Past EU architects have been aware of the dangers of centralisation and the risk of large-scale operations overruling small-scale concerns. In the early 1990s, following the Maastricht Treaty, which aimed at a deeper and stronger integration, a catchword from the Commission was *subsidiarity*. The subsidiarity principle, championed by federalists and Euro-enthusiasts at the time, held that political decisions should





always be taken at the lowest possible level, enabling those who were affected by an issue to have a direct influence on its outcome.

Nobody speaks about subsidiarity any more. It disappeared from view around the same time as the Euro was introduced and the Schengen agreement reduced internal border control just before the turn of the millennium. The tendency has been towards increased centralisation rather than a nesting of scalar levels ensuring continent-wide coordination without obliterating local autonomy and democratic power at the intermediate levels of regions and states. The Danish electorate may indeed have been prescient when, in 1992, it voted against Maastricht under the slogan 'I want a country to be European in'.

There is a scalar gap between the Commission and the community leading to a feeling of disenfranchisement. This is not merely, or even mainly, about immigration to the UK, but about the perceived right to have a real influence. Comparable clashes of scale are witnessed almost everywhere in the world of global neoliberalism. A few handfuls of indigenous groups may have to be sacrificed for the greater good if there is oil on their ancestral land; farming communities may have to be removed if the district needs to dam a river for the sake of industrialisation and electrification; and in the case of the UK, a common view among Brexiteers is that the freedom to live and work around the continent has siphoned jobs away from the British.

The general formula is that what is good for Europe is not necessarily good for the UK; what is good for the UK is not necessarily good for Northumberland; and what is good for Northumberland is not necessarily good for the residents of Durham - indeed, what is good for Durham may well be the same as that which is good for Europe. The loss of subsidiarity, sacrificed on the altar of continent-wide neoliberalism and faith in economies of scale, is a major factor in accounting for the strong animosity towards the EU.

There is another clash of scales at work as well. How could the pundits be so



wrong, many asked when the result of the referendum became known. It may simply be that the experts and commentators live in areas (mainly London) and belong to social groups where loyalty to the European project is unquestioned, and that they were unable to enter into the mindset of people living in different life-worlds.



[Photo](#) by [Tomasz Sienicki](#) (Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY 1.0](#))

The multiple clashing scales which are becoming evident now that the project of European integration is visibly ailing, may stir fragmentation elsewhere in the system. In a multicellular organism which loses a limb, the remaining organs also suffer. In the case of the UK, the current situation recalls the sociologist Tom Nairn's 1977 book *The Break-Up of Britain*. His prophecy was that the long-term survival of the UK was highly doubtful, it being a country composed of four historical nations. He may still be proven right, forty years on. The Scots may demand a second referendum over independence to stay in the EU. Communal tensions in Northern Ireland may flare up. And the desire to secede, whether from the EU and/or from a multinational state, may well be contagious. While such a fission may be advantageous for the individual cells, it is bad news for the multicellular organism, which presupposes that cells are occasionally capable of sacrificing their individual needs, to make compromises and to create webs of



mutual interdependence which reduce conflict and enhance cosmopolitan values.

In a neoliberal world, Europe is likely to survive as a market place, no matter who leaves. (I live in Norway, which is not formally an EU member, but which is fully integrated economically with the rest of the continent.) What is at stake is the political project enabling coordination at higher levels and multiple identities at lower levels. Perhaps a lesson from Brexit could be that Brussels should reintroduce the principle of subsidiarity in a forceful and convincing way. This would weaken its powers of standardisation and uniformisation. The resulting Europe would be bumpier and less smooth, but it would enable its citizens to regain a sense of control over their destinies. They would, to paraphrase the anthropologist Anthony Wallace's famous view of culture, not take part in 'the replication of uniformity, but the organisation of diversity'.

Posted on 29 June 2016 by [thomashyllanderiksen](#).

A shorter version of this commentary is being published by [Social Anthropology](#).