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Current sociological reflections on the Brexit and its consequences

Review of: William Outhwaite (ed.) 2016. BREXIT: Sociological Responses. London and New York: Anthem Press.

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The business of scholarly publishing usually suffers from a substantial time lag, especially so in the social sciences. Quite often, recent developments in society are reflected in academic publications years after they were actually taking place. Sometimes, results of social science analyses are even already outdated upon publication. Against this backdrop, it is more than remarkable that the volume *BREXIT: Sociological Responses*, edited by William Outhwaite, was published just about six months after the United Kingdom referendum on the EU membership, of June 23rd 2016. The vote, which clearly revealed substantial class and age cleavages as well as distinct regional divergences across the UK, does not only affect the British society. It entails numerous repercussions on Europe as a whole, and on the future development of the European Union, in particular. Moreover, albeit Brexit seemingly being grounded in idiosyncrasies within British society and politics at first glance, factors influencing the Brexit decision are by far not just limited to Great Britain. Accordingly, as pointed out in Outhwaite's introduction, the book aims at locating the "short-term political fluctuations" caused by the UK referendum "in a broader historical and social context of the transformation of European and global society" (vii).

The 14 contributions assembled in this volume indeed represent a rich tableau of illuminating sociological reflections on causes, effects, and wider social implications of the Brexit vote. Outhwaite succeeded in bringing together an array of renowned British social scientists and internationally well-known scholars of European studies, such as Craig Calhoun, Colin Crouch, John Holmwood, Gurminder K. Bhambra, Chris Thornhill, Gerard Delanty, Antje Wiener and Adrian Favell, providing their reflections on causes and consequences of the Brexit vote just a few weeks after the referendum. The individual chapters, which are all interesting and worth reading in their own right, add up to a multi-faceted analysis of current political and societal trends both in Great Britain and in contemporary Europe.

The book is divided into three major thematic sections. In Section I entitled "How did it happen?" four different interpretations of how the Brexit referendum came about are presented. The former secretary general of the European Economic and Social Committee *Martin Westlake* discusses the longstanding history of the British *Sonderweg* in European affairs and

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points to several long-term trends in British politics which made the EU referendum somewhat inevitable for Cameron and his party. *Jonathan Hearn*, professor of political and historical sociology at the University of Edinburgh, points to a fundamental cleavage in British society, especially the rising divide amongst anti-European (English) nationalists and cosmopolitans. He interprets the rise of nationalist sentiments in Great Britain as the result of a marked disequilibrium of power in the political system amongst winners and losers of extensive deindustrialization and globalization of British economy since the 1980s. The sociologist and former president of the British Sociological Association *John Holmwood* also highlights the long-lasting preconditions of the Brexit decision, especially the long colonial history of Great Britain and the positive image of the British Empire fundamentally shaping the British self-image of the role of Britain in the world and British nationalist sentiments until today. This has also influenced, as Holmwood argues, the arbitrary position of Britain regarding Europe since the beginning of European integration. Finally, the sociologist *Stefan Auer* interprets the Brexit vote as a clear statement of rejecting the European experiment on postnational democracy, which has been put forward fervently in Europe since the early 1990s. He claims that the Brexit brings the question of national sovereignty back to the fore that seemed outdated and obsolete in an "ever closer" European Union. Consequently, Auer also suggests a direct link between the refugee crisis in Germany in the fall of 2015 and the Brexit vote in June 2016.

In Section II "The politics of Brexit" these analyses are enriched by additional, more general interpretations of current societal and political development in Great Britain and beyond. *Craig Calhoun* also discusses the growing divide between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in contemporary societies. Just as Hearn and Auer, he also understands the rise of nationalism not simply as a product of national culture and traditions, but mainly as a reaction to perceived "external challenges" and as a strategy of conservative elites to mobilize mass support. *Chris Thornhill*, professor of Law at the University of Manchester, in turn, interprets the current state of Europeanization and the alleged democratic deficit of the European Union markedly different from Auer. He argues that institutions of democratic governance, especially representative and judicial elements, are so much interwoven and interlinked in Europe today that a simple decentration of constituent power to nation states would not directly foster the democratic quality of governing. *Gurminder Bhambra*, currently professor of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies at the University of Sussex, also emphasizes the long-lasting colonial history of Britain and its repercussions on contemporary politics. The referendum was less a debate on the 'pros' and 'cons' of EU membership, she claims, than a proxy for discussions about race and migration in British politics. Consequently, she sees strong indications of a "racialized discourse" both in the politics of the referendum itself, but also, more implicitly, in social scientific and media accounts of inequality in the British society. In the two remaining chapters of section II *Colin Crouch* and *Gerard Delanty* present revealing social scientific analyses on the new social cleavages amongst exclusionary nationalism and cosmopolitanism having become manifest in the Brexit vote, but also affecting current politics in numerous other Western societies. Both see indications of a "divided society" (Delanty), in which preferences for exclusionary nationalism *and* preferences for expressive individualism and multiculturalism are equally reaffirmed. Thus, Crouch and Delanty see this new cleavage structure, which goes beyond the traditional cleavage of Left vs. Right, as a major challenge of contemporary politics and European integration.

In Section III another five contributions are dedicated to the discussion of "Prospects for/after Brexit". The political scientist and policy consultant *Tim Oliver* describes the complex diplomatic process after Brexit. At the end of his contribution he discusses various policy options

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between prospects of a "soft" or a "harsh Brexit". The Hamburg-based political scientist *Antje Wiener* examines the mid- and long-term effects of Brexit from the perspective of norms research and her own conceptions of norm contestation. The sociologist *Simon Susen* provides a comprehensive analysis of the Brexit, its larger socio-historical context, and major sociological implications. Finally, he discusses six scenarios of a potential outcome of the Brexit vote. The final two chapters of the book, provided by *Harry F. Dahms* and *Adrian Favell*, are less focused on an analysis of the Brexit decision as such, but rather dedicated to the question what further implication the Brexit holds for sociology (Dahms) and for sociological studies of contemporary Europe (Favell). Dahms criticizes mainstream sociology to be "tied up" too strongly "with values that prevail in society" and which are generally considered as "politically correct". In contrast, he suggests that sociology should focus more systematically on critical approaches and on the "dark sides" of modernity (190f). Favell, in turn, points to the longstanding absence of sociology in European studies and to limitations in making sense of the complex sociological implications of Europeanization. Against this backdrop, he also discusses the paradoxes of British Euroscepticism and the fallacies of British nationalism, which was reaffirmed during the Brexit campaign.

All in all, the volume "BREXIT: Sociological responses" constitutes an excellent example of up-to-date and publicly relevant sociological thought. It shows that quick publication and thorough academic reflection are not mutually exclusive. Apart from some minor exemptions (e.g. the strong political overtone of Auer's chapter or Dahl's very broad discussion of modern sociological thought, which only indirectly addresses the Brexit as such), the book offers a comprehensive sociological understanding of causes and consequences of the Brexit vote, especially through the multiplicity of different perspectives. Certainly, for an even richer sociological understanding of the Brexit decision, some more detailed empirical analyses of the current socio-economic development of British society and of the social situation of different social groups would have been helpful. Moreover, one also misses a discussion of the current state of politics in Britain and what repercussion the vote will have on the territorial cohesion of the country. However, this does not limit the value of the book. In the contrary, the book provides an excellent overview of current positions of British sociologists on the broader sociological implications of UK's EU referendum and numerous inspirations for further reflections on current social trends both in Britain and Europe.

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