Rethinking the futures of Europe

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Understanding Brexit outside of Britain

It has been the principal claim of this volume that neither the causes nor the consequences of Brexit can be adequately understood solely within the confines of the British state. This is not to say that elements of the Brexit vote were not idiosyncratic, that specific actors, institutions and discourses in the UK were irrelevant to the outcome, or that Brexit will not have profound consequences for British politics and society, or for the British economy. It is, rather, to say that any such assessment is incomplete insofar as it fails to acknowledge the context of European history and politics within which Britain’s relations with the EU have been inextricably intertwined. Brexit is thus reflective of – and contributes to – broader issues and disagreements within Europe and the EU, including the ‘democratic deficit’, the tension between national sovereignty and supranational governance, and the persistent legitimacy crisis afflicting the Union.

And, just as Brexit has been shaped by developments in European politics over the decades, so too is Brexit of great significance for the future of Europe. Brexit will have important consequences across a broad range of European institutional arrangements, including the policy process, the relations between the community institutions and the balance of power within them, the forms of governance employed, the legal architecture of Europe, and the norms underpinning the ideal of Europe and the legitimacy of the EU. Brexit also presages major changes to Europe’s foreign policy agenda – and governance – and to the Union’s
credibility and global clout, as well as to the crucial bilateral relationships that form the core of the EU. It is towards an understanding of these effects that the contributors to this volume have lent their considerable expertise and experience, asking as to the future of a Europe in which the UK is no longer a Member State of the EU.

Whilst the authors agree on the need to examine the effects of Brexit from a European perspective, they do not all see eye to eye on the principal challenges posed by Brexit, nor on the most appropriate conceptual lenses through which to understand the consequences of Brexit. How, then, to summarise the views of such a disparate group of scholars, representing a diversity of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives? We suggest here that the best way of drawing together the individual contributions in this volume is by focusing on the commonalities of their endeavour; namely, bringing a plurality of theoretical tools to bear on the consequences of Brexit for a troubled Union. Whilst there is no consensus on the precise effects of Brexit (and how these should be understood) the contributors all agree on two things: (1) that Brexit will have highly significant effects for the future of politics in Europe, and (2) that the critical juncture at which the continent finds itself requires careful, informed scholarly analysis of the options – and possible futures – of Europe and the EU.

By way of a conclusion, we draw several lessons from the contributions of this book, linked by their shared emphasis on the best means of understanding the futures of Europe after Brexit. We begin by defining Brexit as a ‘wicked problem’, before discussing how, when taken together, the contributions help us develop the tools to think through problems such as these. In doing so we make the case for an interdisciplinary approach to Brexit, for the value of theoretical and methodological eclecticism, and for the acknowledgement of contingency and the ontological commitments this entails. We then assess the present ‘state of the Union’, noting the critical juncture at which the EU presently finds itself, as well as the importance of political debate and creative thinking for setting the continent on the right path in the decades ahead.

**Brexit as a ‘wicked problem’**

Originally defined in the 1970s’ social policy literature, ‘wicked problems’ are characterised by having innumerable, complex causes, yet no precedent: each wicked problem is essentially unique. Difficult to
define and delimit, wicked problems have no right or wrong answer, only a good or bad one – and solutions are generally a ‘one-shot’ operation (Rittel & Webber 1973). And, as if this were not enough, there is not just technical difficulty, but social complexity, to deal with: wicked problems tend to include many different stakeholders with radically different views, values and priorities. For all intents and purposes, and according to the criteria outlined above, Brexit is a classic ‘wicked problem’.

Because of their complexity and the *sui generis* nature, ‘wicked problems’ do not lend themselves to comprehension using traditional problem-solving theories. In other words, Brexit, as with any problem of this kind, cannot be adequately understood or resolved from a single standpoint or disciplinary expertise. It needs addressing from a diversity of angles and methodologies. The very orientation toward complex problems tends to trigger research that is not limited to discipline-specific epistemologies, but strays across boundaries. Indeed, it is when the rules and boundaries of individual disciplines are transcended, or coalesce, that knowledge production itself is changed (Barry et al. 2008). This volume, even where individual contributions may remain entirely bound by disciplinary traditions, aspires to a form of interdisciplinarity that highlights divergences in approach and meaning-making. As chapters trace broader, perennial arguments in the social and political science, in history, or the law, the volume does not seek synthesis, but to keep incompatibilities in play. Beyond academic dialogue, however, it also aims to show the extent to which extra-academic, societal factors come into play. Part and parcel of the ‘culture of accountability’ (Nowotny 2003), which marks much interdisciplinary research, the volume’s scope and format have been specifically designed to engage with wider public and policy audiences.

The worth of the academic toolbox to the study of Brexit lies, moreover, in its capacity to draw on a plurality of theoretical approaches. Theory, while context-specific, fosters abstract reflection. It allows us not only to elucidate specific policies, behaviours or outcomes, but to problematise these, and offer normative roadmaps. Crucially, theoretical approaches also help us uncover the assumptions upon which the various arguments already in the public domain are based: after all, ‘the process of theorising is, to a very large extent, a mechanism for the generation and organisation of disagreement’ (Rosamond 2000). Harking back to core theoretical controversies over the ontology of European integration – the nature of the beast – theory helps to highlight the multiplicity of potential
scenarios available for the future(s) of Europe, and the methodolo-
gies by which these might be modelled. As such, theory also helps to
contextualise Brexit both spatially and temporally, linking the pre-
sent day to debates over politics more generally, and to other classes
of events and processes. It also couches Brexit more firmly in the
existing social science literature, affording students and scholars
analytical leverage over Brexit as a phenomenon worthy of, and ame-
nable to, academic study.

Moreover, the acknowledgement of contingency is core to the
enterprise of understanding ‘wicked problems’. Reflecting that things
could have ended up differently represents both an important ontological
claim and an important lesson in moderation. Making space for contin-
gency in our analyses of Brexit requires attention to the three ‘semantic
pillars’ of the concept (Schedler 2007). The first of these is the notion of
indeterminacy – the real possibility that things could be, or could have
been, otherwise. That the Brexit vote, and its consequences, could have
turned out very differently must feature in our understanding of how
the event will contribute to Europe’s future. We must acknowledge, in
other words, that there was nothing inevitable about the occurrence, or
the consequences, of the decision. A second facet of contingency is that
social phenomena may be conditional upon prior events and causes in
ways that have not been anticipated, or as a consequence of unexpected
factors, interactions, or causal chains. Brexit is no exception to this rule,
to which the attention afforded novel areas of political study – regard-
ing, for instance, social media and the ‘losers’ of globalisation – readily
attests. And thirdly, it must be acknowledged that the consequences of
contingent events cannot be predicted with certainty. The outcome, for
Europe, of the Brexit vote will be in flux for some time, and will not be
amenable to (easy) prediction.

All of these semantic parameters matter. After all, the future of
Europe will depend, fundamentally, on contingencies in the years ahead.
The actions of those representing Britain and the EU will matter more
now than they will at other times, making careful scrutiny of policy-
makers on both sides of the channel ever more necessary. Events, too,
may come to affect the final outcome of negotiations in ways that are
difficult to predict. National elections, terrorist attacks, economic shocks
or geopolitical crises may all come to exert an independent effect on the
outcome of the negotiations. Theory, therefore, can only take us so far. It
can help us map out scenarios and tease out underlying assumptions, but
it will need constant refinement and careful attention to events as they
unfold. Studying Brexit is like tracking a moving target.
The future of Europe

If the contributors to this volume agree on one, simple ‘fact’, it is that the EU is certainly in trouble. Indeed, the Union has been ailing for some time under the pressure of a multidimensional crisis which ‘cuts to the core of EU itself’ (Dinan et al. 2017). Be it the migration and refugee crisis, the structural problems afflicting the eurozone, long-standing concerns about governance and institutions, the rise of illiberalism in the East, or the rift between Germany’s economic vision and Greece’s economic needs – the credibility and legitimacy of EU institutions have taken a severe hit. Geopolitically, moreover, the EU finds itself in a difficult situation; threatened by a resurgent Russia on its Eastern borders and in its ‘neighbourhood’, spurned by Trump’s isolationist posturing vis-à-vis the transatlantic relationship, and lacking the coherence of alternative rising power centres – like China – in the emerging multipolar order (Anheier & Falkner 2017; Cox 2017). The vote for the UK to leave the Union contributes a further item to this litany of problems. As Brexit takes centre stage, these structural crises may be pushed to the margins of public perception, but their challenge will continue to need addressing.

To conclude on something of a positive note, nothing enlivens conversation quite like a crisis, and the moment of salience experienced by the question of Europe’s future must not be wasted. The Brexit vote has spurred conversation across the continent about the purpose of the EU and the appropriate place of Britain in Europe. The referendum has placed core issues of European integration at the heart of domestic debates in the UK and in other Member States across the Union (not to mention in Brussels). Choice is back on the table. Proposals from the European Commission have varied from ‘doing less more efficiently’ to ‘doing much more together’, among other options (although it is evident which of these the Commission would prefer) (European Commission 2017b). Important questions, moreover, are being asked about what it means to be democratic in an age of globalisation, how economies should be structured so they work efficiently for all, how the future relationship between Britain and Europe should be construed, how we define ourselves as citizens of Europe and of our own countries, and how Europe can articulate its values within the changing global environment. This re-politicisation of the European project, and the opening up of public debate on the question of Europe’s future, represent positive developments for European politics, wherever one lies on key ideological fault lines.
The outcome of the Brexit negotiations may not (indeed, probably cannot) please everyone, but British and European democracy will be healthier, *ceteris paribus*, if the citizens of Europe engage in greater levels of political deliberation and understanding. Brexit, in this sense, has acted as a wake-up call to decision-makers and the public to face the reality of Europe’s problems and to undertake serious action to identify solutions, given the enormity of the stakes. There is no reason to think, moreover, that the UK cannot be a part of this discussion. After all, the recognition that Europe is in crisis is ‘apolitical’ in the broadest sense. Discussion of Europe’s problems is not to take a position on the Leave/Remain debate, nor is it to identify oneself as a Eurosceptic or a Europhile. Indeed, Theresa May acknowledged as much in her Florence speech of 22 September 2017 when she noted that the ‘success of the EU is profoundly in our [the UK’s] national interest and that of the wider world’, and referred to the ‘vibrant debate going on about the shape of the EU’s institutions and the direction of the Union in the years ahead’ (May 2017b).

Europe, and the EU, thus find themselves at a ‘critical juncture’ (Sus 2017, 115); one hastened, for sure, by Brexit, but also reflecting broader social, institutional and geopolitical challenges facing the continent. And yet, it is this very sense of crisis that galvanises both citizens and elites alike, and offers the possibility of meaningful reform at the European level aimed at improving the lives of European citizens. In this new and complicated political environment, carefully articulated ideas about Europe’s problems, and their potential solutions, are more relevant than ever before, since agency matters more than ever at times of crisis and upheaval. The contributions in this volume have all taken seriously the question of where Europe’s future lies after Brexit. In offering cogent analyses of crucial actors, institutions, relationships and issues, they help us to rethink the future of the European project and contribute to vital debates taking place across the continent.