Brexit Symposium

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KAI OPPERMANN, VIATCHESLAV MOROZOV, MARIA MäLKSOO & JAMES D. MORROW, SEP 10 2016

Participants to this symposium:

- **Kai Oppermann, University of Sussex:**
- **Viatcheslav Morozov, University of Tartu**
- **Maria Mälksoo, University of Tartu**
- **James D. Morrow, University of Michigan**

Ana Bojinović Fenko: Introduction

In light of the results of the UK referendum vote on withdrawal from the European Union (published 24 June 2016 during the CEEISA-ISA joint conference organized in Ljubljana), an *ad hoc* round table on Brexit was organized. This online symposium is a continuation of that debate, aimed at furthering the IR academic community's understanding causes, and predicting the effects of the (potential) Brexit. All contributions point to a finding that the Brexit vote phenomenon is not a time-space exception, but rather a symptom of a systemic failure of democratic governance at the national and EU levels, due to the political establishment's failure to effectively mediate between locally embedded 'space of places' and evermore globally omnipresent 'space of flows'.[1]

In his post, Kai Oppermann looks beyond the immediate referendum campaign and the responsibility of individual party leaders for the referendum result. He offers a long-term perspective on the structural elements in British politics that enabled the vote for Brexit; namely the dysfunction of the British political system and the people's distrust and dissatisfaction with the political and economic establishment. Extending the structural analysis to the level of international system, Viatcheslav Morozov argues that the leave vote represents a decolonialization of the UK from Europe demanded by the disenfranchised periphery against globalization. In terms of domestic agency, the have-nots in the most prosperous Western capitalist core, agitated by extreme right xenophobes, have triggered a new question for Political Science in general, on how to practice 'proper' glocalisation.

Maria Mälksoo complements this debate by changing the perspective on the EU from structure to agency, exposing the potential Brexit consequences for EU's global actorness. She evaluates the prospects for the continuation of a normative power agenda and a more hard power external action strategy by the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize holder, also linking the actor's capabilities to sources of domestic (intra-EU) strengthening. The latter is especially highlighted by James D. Morrow who identifies in UK's withdrawal an opportunity for the EU to raise the political accountability of its institutions by building more federal elements – a change of political system that he illustrates with an interesting comparison from early USA history.

Kai Oppermann: 'Brexit' and the Dysfunctions of British Politics

Political turning points such as the vote for 'Brexit' inevitably raise questions of responsibility. These questions are critical for any political judgment about who or what has to take the blame or can claim credit for the fallout from the vote for British and European politics. The easiest and most obvious targets for such attributions of responsibility clearly are the main protagonists of the referendum campaign. The democratic principle of holding political leaders to

account would suggest nothing less. Along these lines, David Cameron has to take responsibility for committing to the referendum in January 2013 for narrow party political reasons and for miscalculating (or ignoring) the risks of losing the vote. Boris Johnson for fighting a populist campaign that involved inherently contradictory promises he must have known are impossible to keep. Jeremy Corbyn for being largely invisible during most of the campaign. Nigel Farage for appealing to voters' lowest instincts. And so on.

As obvious as these easy attributions of responsibility might be, they also mask longer-term and more structural patterns in British politics which made the referendum and how the campaign has unfolded possible in the first place. Two factors, in particular, are important.

First, the vote for 'Brexit' is a consequence of how the European issue has played out in British politics over the last 30 years. Ever since Margaret Thatcher went to Bruges to attack what she perceived was a 'European superstate', this debate has been dominated by an increasingly vitriolic Europhobic narrative. Fired up by parts of the British media and the adversarial nature of British politics, Euroscepticism has become 'normalised' in public discourse to an extent that it remains largely unchallenged. The failure of the Blair government to develop a powerful public narrative in favour of European integration despite its unassailable domestic position post-1997 and its relatively pro-European outlook is a point in case. Given the anticipated political costs of confronting Euroscepticism, governments of all stripes have rather chosen to evade and diffuse the European issue. EU referendums that were promised but never held have played a significant part in this. The longer term effects, however, have been to further fuel the Europhobic narrative and to link it in with anti-establishment politics. Since the British party system has been unable to accommodate contestation over Europe in terms of parliamentary government-opposition dynamics, Euroscepticism manifests itself largely as a challenge to political elites from outside Westminster and from inside the two main British parties. That the referendum has taken place at all is a direct consequence of the dysfunctions of the British political system which pushed the European debate beyond the arena of parliamentary politics. The political logic of referendum campaigns, in turn, was always bound to add to the difficulties in challenging the combination of a dominant Eurosceptic narrative and anti-establishment politics.

Second, the referendum outcome shows the extent of general distrust and dissatisfaction with political and economic elites among the British public. That distrust has partly to do with how the European issue has been handled in the past but runs much deeper and reflects a sentiment among large sections of British society of having been 'left behind' and failed by the political system. This sentiment was easily tapped into by the 'leave' campaign who played on the binary logic of referendum contests to mobilise a divide between 'ordinary citizens' and the establishment. As a case in point, the 'leave' side succeeded in discrediting the opinions of a great majority of economic experts or the interventions of international organisations as just another elite stitch-up. The vote has thus turned on its head the conventional wisdom about referendum campaigns that the side which enlists broader elite support will win out. Although the leading faces of the 'leave' campaign are of course as much part of the political elite as anybody, 'Brexit' was no less a vote against the British political and economic establishment as against the EU.

Although attributing the responsibility for 'Brexit' to Cameron, Johnson, Corbyn or Farage might be cathartic, we should not lose sight of the broader political context of the referendum. This is not to deny that agency matters in referendum campaigns or that political leaders make choices for which they must be held accountable. It is to suggest, however, that the vote for 'Brexit' was only made possible by longer-term trends in British politics. This broader political context also makes it unlikely that a future UK government will try to override the vote to leave the European Union either through parliament, early elections or a second referendum. This would stand to reinforce the sense of alienation with political elites of already disaffected parts of British society and play into existing Europhobic narratives to an extent that the long-term political costs are prohibitive. The likelihood, therefore, is that the next British Prime Minister will sooner or later trigger Art. 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and negotiate some form of 'Brexit' from the European Union. How exactly this will play out and on what terms and when Britain will leave the European Union is anybody's guess.

Viatcheslav Morozov: Brexit, Critique of Colonialism and the Crisis of Democratic Representation

One key aspect of the British vote that has not been highlighted enough in the ongoing debate is the significance of

the legacy of imperialism, colonialism, and the more general context of center-periphery relations in the global capitalist system. It is sufficiently clear that the outcome was produced by a vote of the disenfranchised periphery against the globalized center. Imperial nostalgia was also discernable in the debate, even though not always in a plainly articulated form. Yet the rhetoric of 'getting our country back' invites much more direct parallels with the decolonial discourses existing elsewhere in the semi-periphery of world politics, in countries such as Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela.

The Leave vote was a move by a former empire fighting back against the overwhelming forces of globalization, but it was also imagined as an act of decolonization. The European Union was featured in the campaign as an invader, a supranational polity that is culturally and historically alien yet increasingly taking over the right to decide for the Brits – in other words, as a colonial power.

Moreover, Europeanization is perceived as a form of colonization in the original, and most literal, sense of the latter term: as a physical settlement of the colonizers in the colonized lands leading to a displacement of the autochthonous population. It is indicative that while demonizing 'the immigrant' as a generalized figure, the pro-Leave xenophobes made little difference between the EU citizens using their legal right to the freedom of movement within the Union, economic migrants from the Commonwealth countries or refugees from the crisis zones in Syria and elsewhere. Despite the fundamentally different circumstances that drove these groups of people away from home, they were all depicted as somehow imposed on Britain by Brussels. It did not matter whether the migrants themselves were perceived as European, nor what the logic of the colonial power was in allegedly encouraging the resettlement: what was important was the postulated encroachment by the migrants on the status and well-being of the natives, and the fact that European integration was blamed for that.

The British vote against the EU was thus no more – but also no less – democratic than the vote in favor of Chávez, Erdoğan or Putin. It must be taken seriously as an expression of genuine popular discontent with inequality, social exclusion, the erosion of the welfare state and democratic accountability. It was, as pointed out above, a vote of the disenfranchised periphery against globalization, as well as against those who benefit from globalization and those who promote it.

As an act of desperate protest against neoliberal globalization, Brexit certainly has its share of democratic legitimacy. At the same time, it is hardly surprising that so many observers find it difficult to accept as properly democratic. The problem was not just in the appallingly low quality of the campaign. Rather, the shameless propaganda was an element of a much wider distortion at the very core of democratic representation, in the way the figure of 'the people' is framed by the Brexiteers. Britain is constructed in their discourse as a culturally defined organic community, clearly separated from Europe and the rest of the World. They claim to fight against oppression, but the oppressed are represented in an essentialist manner: it is only the bearers of 'true Britishness' who deserve compassion and solidarity, while the others, even the most destitute ones, are antagonized as representing the colonizers from the Continent.

This form of right-wing appropriation of the emancipatory agenda is certainly not new: its most radical historical analog is nationalsocialism, while the list of more moderate contemporary examples would include a range of political leaders in movements in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. The novel moment illustrated by the Brexit vote, as well as by the Trump phenomenon and a number of other examples from the Western core, is that one no longer needs to be located in a peripheral country to claim that one's nation is being colonized. The anonymous forces of neoliberal globalization have created massive gaps between the haves and the have nots even in the most prosperous nations, and it is all too easy for the right wing to portray these gaps as displacement of locals by foreigners.

Ultraconservative xenophobes do not hesitate to appropriate postcolonial critique of capitalism and colonialism in order to come up with handy labels that sound democratic, but whose true effect consists in blocking popular representation. Unfortunately, their opponents are still looking for the ways of formulating a democratic agenda suitable for a globalized world where the nation state remains the main locus of political decision making. To overcome the crisis of democratic representation, we would need to find a way to imagine 'the people' in non-essentialist terms and to properly account for the contradictions between the global and the local.

Maria Mälksoo: Elvis Has Just Left the Building

The EU's prolonged indecisiveness (or 'constructive ambiguity' in the EU-studies vernacular) about its further federalisation v. continuation as a complex postmodern polity of a very special kind has borne fruit. What a rotten fruit that is. Much of the media and elite reaction to the Brexit vote of 23 June 2016 reminded one of the colourful expression of Andrew Lockhart, an otherwise pretty colourless CIA director in the Showtime TV-series Homeland, which cannot be quoted in a polite public forum. Whereas the British referendum might mark the end of uncertainty vis-à-vis the UK's fraught relationship with the EU for the 52 per cent who voted out, it opens up a well of uncertainties for the future of the EU.

It is a Schmittian moment of sovereign decision, with all its potentially violent consequences. Will it turn out to be a moment of sovereign decisiveness for the EU in adopting a more radical reform regarding its nature as a political union, transcending the territorial state, yet with mounting concerns about its democratic deficit and legitimacy? Or shall it push the Union back to a square one of sorts, mostly occupied with sorting out the 'peace amongst ourselves', and hence a more inward-looking stance for the foreseeable time (which would really amount to a reckless luxury in today's world)?

The EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini certainly does not think so, having put a forceful new EU Global Strategy on the table just a few days after the British referendum. 'Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe', adopted by the European Council on 28 June, and tuned around the notions of 'principled pragmatism' and 'resilience' offers an atypically sober and realistic strategic guideline for the EU's foreign and security policy which will be of considerably lesser international clout after the implementation of Brexit. The strategy has, rather reasonably, dropped many of the EU's transformative power pretensions, while keeping the firm endorsement of a rule-based global order. The EU's 'normative power' (or the ability to shape the conceptions of the 'normal' within the Union and beyond)[2] has indeed suffered serious consecutive blows in the course of battling the most recent economic crisis, saving Greece and the Eurozone, handling the ongoing refugee/migrant influx along with the troubles in its 'Eastern neighbourhood', and now Brexit – all that against the backdrop of a rather modern power Russia, only regaining its assertiveness in Europe and the world.

While plentifully aspirational, the EU's new Global Strategy is not delusional. It is painfully aware that besides the recent tolls on the Union's normative credibility and shine, the EU's hard power will also be significantly diminished after the second largest economy and the greatest military power of the EU has decided to leave the building. Without the largest European spender on defence and the vital link in the EU-NATO cooperation, the EU will be a less convincing global actor or even just a less capable regional pacifier. Even though Britain has generally been reluctant to act militarily through the EU, the EU is likely to have a less global reach and vision, less assertiveness *vis-à-vis* Russia, and less gravitas in the eyes of Europe's diplomatic interlocutors elsewhere with the UK's exit. The 'half-full' school of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy analysts reads this as a potential momentum for a decisive (and largely French) push towards further strategic autonomy of the EU. For the more sceptical (often from Eastern Europe), it is difficult to interpret such optimism but a half-empty promise for the necessary capabilities to make it credible won't be there: the UK's share of the EU's defence budgets has been roughly 21 per cent against the generally dismal defence spending levels in the EU and the Europeans' consequent inability to pull their weight in NATO.

It might well be that the biggest source of Europe's influence is 'neither its soldiers nor even its trade, but the success of the way it does things internally'.[3] The British people have spoken what they think about the EU's efficiency and commendability in that regard. Now more than ever, the EU has to gather its bearings to make sure the Nobel Prize Committee's decision to grant the 2012 Peace Prize to the EU 'for over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe' won't be read *in spe* as a hasty attempt to honour a political elder before the inevitable happened – and the mark could only have been made posthumously, after the utter unravelling of the EU.

James D. Morrow: The Possibilities Opened by Brexit

Brexit could be the best thing that ever happened to the EU. For a quarter-century, the institutions of the Union have been stuck between a loose confederation and a centralized government. The central organs of the Union have the power to impose regulations on member governments, control monetary policy, and overrule national laws, while national governments still control fiscal policy, defense and foreign policy, and legislation. Political accountability works through national elections, while European elections that select the European Parliament draw much smaller turnout of voters than national elections. The overlapping and separated delegation of power across EU and national institutions contribute to the disconnect that many Europeans feel from the governing organs of the Union which contributes to the "democratic deficit" evident in the Brexit referendum and in poll results showing anti-Brussels views across many EU countries. If European leaders seize this moment to transform EU institutions to create stronger political accountability of those institutions to European voters, the Union can be lifted out of its crisis.

If any member leaves the Union, Britain is the one that makes such a transformation more likely. Britain has always been skeptical of the power of the EU to impinge on its sovereignty and held out of the two most significant acts of washing away national borders in favour of a single, united Europe: the Euro and the Schengen zone. Its Anglo-American economic system conflicts with the continental vision of a more regulated market. No Britain removes a powerful state opposed to a closer union.

I am not optimistic that European leaders will be able to seize this moment; indeed, I doubt they will. Transferring powers from national governments to the centre reduces the ability of national leaders to answer the demands of their electorates and so threatens their political fortunes. Would Prime Minister Tsipras of Greece want to face his voters with the last shred of his government's control over fiscal policy moved to the Union? Would Chancellor Merkel willingly surrender Germany's position as the first and foremost European power to a central government responsive to voters who desire more expansive economic policies?

Even if Europe moves toward a better union with real political accountability for EU institutions, those who consider themselves Europeans first will be unhappy with many of the resulting policies. EU institutions that are more responsive to European voters will have to respect the views of those who oppose erasing national borders and wish to slow the move towards one uniform Europe. Solving the democratic deficit requires respecting the views of European skeptics as well as proponents of a stronger Union.

The history of the United States offers an instructive parallel moment. After independence was gained from Great Britain, the new republic was governed under the Articles of Confederation. The thirteen states remained sovereign, and the Congress, despite its power to conduct foreign policy, lacked the power to regulate commerce among the states, to tax, or to raise troops; powers reserved for the states. Lacking an executive or a judiciary, Congress had no means to enforce its judgments. All measures of the Congress required unanimity, and all thirteen states had one vote for their delegations in the Congress. The weakness of the system became clear quickly as both the Congress and the states struggled to pay their debts accumulated during the Revolutionary War. A convention to revise the Articles was called and convened in Philadelphia in 1787; it drafted the U.S. Constitution, creating a federal system with a strong central government, despite widespread opposition from the Anti-Federalists who feared tyranny at the hands of such a government. The division between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists was the major cleavage in the politics of the first decades of the United States of America. None of the Founding Fathers could have envisioned how the power of the central government they created in 1787 would grow over the next two centuries.

One final point: although Britain has voted to leave, it may not. The terms of separation must be negotiated with the EU, and the latter will take a firm position to deter other attempts to leave the Union. If the British economy suffers in the coming months as the advocates of Remain argued, British voters may turn against Brexit. A 52-48 vote is hardly a landslide, although a second referendum to overturn the first would have to win by a larger margin to endorse remaining in the EU.

A word of comfort from the United States for my European friends: cheer up, it could be worse. One of your major parties could be led by a reality TV star.

Notes

[1] Castells, Manuel. 2000. *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age, Economy, Society and Culture.* 2nd Edition. Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing (p. 406-409).

[2] Ian Manners, Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2) (2002): 235-58.

[3] Sven Biscop, Global and Operational: A New Strategy for EU Foreign and Security Policy, *IAI Working Paper* 15 (July 2015), p. 5.

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Viatcheslav Morozov is Professor of EU-Russia Studies at the University of Tartu. His current research explores how Russia's political and social development has been conditioned by the country's position in the international system. This approach has been laid out in his most recent monograph*Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (Palgrave, 2015), while the comparative dimension is explored, inter alia, in the edited volume *Decentring the West: The Idea of Democracy and the Struggle for Hegemony* (Ashgate, 2013). He is a member of the Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia). In 2007–2010, he was a member of the Executive Council of the Central and East European International Studies Association (CEEISA).

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Communist and Post-Communist Studies, *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, and in several edited volumes. Her current research focuses on the nexus between transitional justice and foreign policies on the example of post-communist Russia.

James D. Morrow is A.F.K. Organski Collegiate Professor of World Politics and Research Professor at the Center for Political Studies, both at the University of Michigan, having also taught at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, Stanford University, the University of Rochester, and Michigan State University. His research addresses crisis bargaining, the causes of war, military alliances, arms races, power transition theory, links between international trade and conflict, the role of international institutions, international law, and domestic politics and foreign policy. He is the author of Order within Anarchy, Game Theory for Political Scientists, co-author of The Logic of Political Survival, and author of over thirty articles in refereed journals and another thirty other publications. Professor Morrow is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He received the Karl Deutsch Award from the International Studies Association in 1994. He was President of the Peace Science Society in 2008-2009 and has held fellowships from the Social Science Research Council and the Hoover Institution.