

## **Brexit and New Autochthonic Politics of Belonging**

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### *Abstract*

The outcome of the 2016 European Union membership referendum is re-shaping the United Kingdom's relationship with the EU through shifting geopolitical positioning(s) and the (re)introduction of barriers and boundaries and also challenging British and EU citizens to revise their everyday sense of belonging. Accordingly, Brexit incorporates emergent and contested political projects of belonging, determining anew who belongs in a post-EU Britain. This paper discusses research directions focusing on the construction of political and everyday senses of belonging implied by public debates on Brexit, and critically examines the shifts in attitude towards received citizenship and different degrees of social exclusion.

### **Introduction**

Following a referendum in June 2016 the UK narrowly voted to leave the European Union amid heated debates and conflictual information regarding key issues. The process of exiting the EU is about to begin, however current discussions are taking place in a climate of political, economic, social, and cultural uncertainties. One of the most controversial issues raised by Brexit is the question of belonging (Gilmartin, Wood and O'Callaghan, 2018). This is not simply a matter of changing political affiliations, especially the growing relationship of British society to the transnational networks and institutions called the European Union. It is also, and primarily, a matter of everyday senses of being inside or outside a community, a consensus or what Anderson and Wilson recently called 'the EU's affective present – the multiple senses of what the contemporary feels like to live in' (Anderson and Wilson, 2017: 2). A

number of fundamental questions have arisen which seemingly await further public and academic discussion. Who can claim (and does so) to belong to British society? Will belonging be a matter of external ascription (e.g. by citizenship or ethnicity) or of free individual choice? What ways of living together in a socially unequal, fragmented and increasingly polarised society are emerging on the grounds of new senses of belonging?

At present it is not only the public who are struggling with the new awareness of the implications of belonging, in particular the tension between external positioning and self-positioning of social actors; it is also the social sciences which are experiencing unexpected uncertainties of how to deal with this aspect of Brexit. It is certainly true that ‘Brexit became an occasion of dissensus and the complex enactment and reproduction of existing power relations and inequalities; intensifying, revealing and foregrounding existing divides of class, age, ethnicity, race, and locality, while also cutting across other commonalities...’ (Anderson and Wilson, 2017: 1). But there is still more about the everyday implications of Brexit that exceeds this traditional understanding of politically induced social change. What has become obvious is that although shifting modes of social in-/exclusion, identity building and belonging call for context-sensitive theorizing, the concepts presently at hand are mostly decontextualized and not directly applicable to the specificities of Brexit.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework for approaching the issue of Brexit-related belonging. It does so by exploring the concept of autochthony as a more elastic notion for the basis of belonging than more familiar and seemingly fixed categories, such as ‘race’, ‘citizenship’, ‘religion’, ‘gender’. We contend that shifting, often vague, understandings of autochthony inform various everyday politics of belonging. This, in turn, makes it difficult to directly assign

emerging cleavages, such as those that have been expressed by the opposition of Brexiteers and Remainers, to the well-known drivers of social inequality of the past (cf. Anderson and Wilson, 2017). Therefore careful analytical reconstruction of such everyday politics is necessary to grasp the connotations and situated positionings of social actors, so as to be able to better identify the shifting lines of exclusion and inclusion that Brexit has produced, or at least made prominent. The paper ends with a proposal for a corresponding future research agenda on the ‘Brexit’ type of politics of belonging.

Since our task affords several shifts in perspective, between empirical observations, theoretical framing and extrapolations into future research agendas, it assumes a somewhat unusual character. It combines the qualities of a thought piece on social change, a concept paper which seeks to address a mutable phenomenon of social practice which tends to escape well-known theoretical notions, and a research agenda statement. We intentionally maintain this multi-purpose design to encourage readers to become involved in open explorations of a still evolving social issue.

### **Brexit literatures: at odds with ‘Brexit & belonging’**

The basic idea we put forward has emerged from the insight that until now the social sciences have only partially grasped the multidimensionality of Brexit. In particular, the everyday impact of shifting political framings (i.e. from de-bordered EU-bound perspectives to re-nationalised, UK-centred ones) has only occasionally been addressed (Anderson and Wilson, 2017). There is hardly more than scattered assumptions that the former social, economic and political complexity of EU membership might persist but over time lose its power. Such complexity has been expressed by softened border regimes, the enhanced international mobility of capital

and labour, changing accessibility of member countries to new migrants (especially in the course of the recent refugee crisis), and new political and social commitments to the ideas of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. All this constitutes an intricate web of powers, impacts, ideas, traded interdependencies and political obligations that have for decades had a transforming effect on British society.

Consequently, Brexit has clear vernacular implications, which transcend the obvious. It is not simply a matter of political framing, economic restructuring and institutionalisation. Rather, against a threatening backdrop of contested institutions, rising mobilities and economic crisis British and EU citizens feel challenged to revise their everyday sense of belonging. As Cueppens and Geschiere (2005: 387) highlight in their analysis of belonging in Africa, belonging ‘promises safety, but in practice it raises fierce disagreement over who “really” belongs—over whose claims are authentic and whose are not.’ This involves the idea that individuals are generally certain about their roots. One obvious approach to belonging therefore is to understand it as a primordial concept. The recent rise in firmly grounded nationalism and right-wing populism seems to support this claim. It does not come as a surprise that this perspective has been made strong by studies, which see Brexit as a return to nationalism and a national identity, which used to be grounded on primordiality and the pride in the former British Empire (Richards and Smith, 2017; Calhoun, 2016; Newbiggin, 2017). But do primordiality and nostalgia really play a decisive role in forming the opposing fractions of Brexiteers and Remainers? Or is it rather the situated social construction of ‘we’ under conditions of uncertainty that might create a wider sense of belonging? If so, the new ‘Brexit belonging’ research agenda has to acknowledge the growing complexity of references that people make when they achieve cognitive and emotional attachments to something, which they might address

as their home or safe basis for everyday action. Social analysis has to uncover the formative function of *contextualised* social practices, and shifting ways of producing social commonalities or differences.

Having said this, we go on to assume that the particular analytical challenge, which Brexit poses, lies in its polarising quality. In contrast to former periods of relatively 'undisturbed' social evolution, political and public discourses now indulge in seemingly excessive simplification. Discussants from all sides have subdued almost everything and everyone to a dichotomous logic of consent vs. dissent. Political contestation and everyday responses suggest that Brexit might simply be a matter of making the 'right' choices: either of re-nationalizing and finding one's place in the world again by emphasising the national, or of voting for cosmopolitanism and open global exchange. This logic has left its imprints on research agendas, which envisage the effects of Brexit as an outcome of sweeping political events and corresponding binary decisions (Hobolt, 2016; Menon and Fowler, 2016).

In practice, however, a strong element of transgression is being felt. Everyday belonging may refer to 'binary decisions' but it also involves affect, changing anticipation of individual futures, and a sense of how it will feel to live with accelerating changes. First empirical observations indicate that such anticipation involves a different sense of autochthony than provided by feelings of national identity, superiority or primordiality (Kaufmann, 2016; Balthazar, 2017). Being British or part of a 'community at home', or developing a sense of social-normality-altered-by-Brexit, now may encompass a far broader understanding of social difference, inequality, separateness from others, and 'natural' in-/exclusion than the terms 'national identity' and 'national belonging' usually suggested in the past. The conceptual gap, which has opened here on the one hand extends to the question of

how complex everyday individual and collective references to political events actually are. On the other hand it incorporates the extent to which such references surpass the nationalist pattern of ‘we and the others’.

Addressing this gap we start from a perspective, which is rooted in the idea of the mutable social construction of belonging. It encourages research which reflects upon the various political and everyday references that everyday actors make to heterogeneous items of belonging, social inclusion or feeling-at-home. At a superficial level, such references may be based on the re-adaptation of older concepts of national identity and belonging as offered by politics, thereby activating ready-to-use stereotypes and collective feelings (Balthazar, 2017). At a deeper level, however, belonging may refer to more flexible, open and vague ideas of social (inter)relatedness which emerged during the very process of change.

In the following we will have closer look at the particular challenges for the conceptualisation of the notion of belonging as posed by Brexit. We will proceed to a deepened discussion of the notion of autochthony and the conceptual links produced by theorizing belonging as implication of everyday intersectionality. The first part of the paper will thus close with a short conclusion concerning the possible advances in theory building on Brexit achieved by a contextualised linking of belonging-by-autochthony and situated intersectionality. We will then proceed to a draft research agenda focusing on Brexit, which makes use of this compound concept.

**An altered theoretical perspective on belonging: autochthony**

The concept of autochthony (Cueppens and Geschiere, 2005; Geschiere, 2009) we adopt here starts from the observation that belonging often affords a more or less concrete object of identification or social referencing to become viable (e.g. a visible community, a particular neighbourhood). While this requires socialities forged by direct social interaction and affective bonds, Brexit activates still another dimension of social life, which is based on the quasi-nationalist invocation of community. Such belonging reconciles the concrete with the abstract and produces a broader, if not comprehensive object of social imagination. Brexit made a definite change to everyday understandings of inclusion as now there is a felt imperative to decide who is a rightful autochthonous member of society (as opposed to a stranger or allochthon). This lays emphasis on larger groups and communities ('the' British society), which are implicitly made more relevant than just minorities or particular status groups. It provides a more universal mode of in-/exclusion, thereby seeking to shape the foundations of society, not its margins. Autochthonous belonging could be an even more powerful imaginary than other social categorizations such as ethnicity or culture, place or race (for problems of conceptualizing ethnicity see Jenkins, 2010). While such a broad categorical understanding of autochthony decentralizes well-established categories of social difference and inequality, it nevertheless must refer back to everyday procedures of drawing social boundaries and establishing a sense of inclusion/exclusion that informs community building, solidarity and respect of others. Such procedures have been recently addressed by border studies when conceptualizing processes of bordering, debordering and rebordering (Cassidy, Yuval-Davis and Wemyss, 2018; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, forthcoming), and by intersectionality studies when applying the idea of the continual social production of multiple overlays of inequality to bordering and its implications, in

particular processes of othering, social positioning and the emergence of belonging (McCall, 2005). The initial complexity of this approach dissipates into a streamlined perspective once the links between both concepts are considered in more detail.

***Using the dual notion of debordering/rebordering.***

This notion has been developed by recent border studies (Berg and van Houtum, 2003; Dimitrovova, 2010) to clarify the everyday significance of the multidimensional flux of ideas and imaginaries directed towards political borders and persons/institutions perceived as being representative of borders. It involves shifting interpretations of what is on this side and beyond a border, and it is grounded in othering, which declares persons and objects as either familiar or foreign. Bordering therefore refers to incorporated social boundaries. It is not necessarily restricted to visible borders and demarcations but can also be practiced through addressing border-crossers, migrants, social minorities, and others living next door (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, 2018; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, forthcoming). Political borders and everyday social boundaries thus interact. In particular, this approach seeks to explain how political shifts, institutional changes and legal amendments produce suggestions, normative propositions, constraints and imperatives which are then operationalized and developed in discourses led by ordinary citizens.

***Discussing the issue of shifting social in-/exclusion on the basis of the theoretical concept of intersectionality.***



This approach assumes that intersecting axes of inequality continually define and alter the social positions of individuals and groups (Anthias, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). Intersectionality is an outcome of the situational accumulation of heterogeneous aspects of inequality. It is liable to be reinforced by increasing pressure on ‘others’. Bordering nourishes intersectionality because it encourages everyday actors to think in inside/outside divisions, e.g. in the context of claims for rightful citizenship. In the particular case of Brexit pressure arises on people who have to prove that they have a right or a natural link to British society. Observable shifts in attitude towards others (who, for example, might lack features of received citizenship) may affect various other pre-existing forms of social exclusion and also add new dimensions of inequality by questioning the rightfulness of minority claims for inclusion and participation. We will consequently conceptualize new exclusion of the ‘Brexit type’ as an outcome of situated gazes related to in-/exclusionary social practices (see Yuval-Davis, 2016; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, 2018). At the same time such bordered intersectionality produces differential pathways to social positioning and corresponding belonging. Those who practice bordering from the standpoint of a majority mostly seek to define others from an imagined superior positioning that necessarily places others in an inferior position. Intersectionality helps to stabilize these assigned positions. This entails a sense of belonging to an imagined majority. Those who are subject to external positioning respond with self-positioning, which may be reciprocal or geared towards emancipation. It involves the need to define an attitude of belonging, either to a majority which is approached for inclusion, or to a minority group which promises security or emancipation. Complex positioning and repositioning thus trigger complex procedures in creating senses of belonging.

Seen together, as interacting concepts, bordering and intersectionality can explain the everyday negotiation and emergence of social positioning and belonging. Their linkage creates apt scope for the theorizing of autochthony, e.g. as a concept which transcends individual axes of inequality and provides a more comprehensive understanding of ‘bordered’ inclusion. Within this comprehensiveness it may assume changing bias or focus, stressing one aspect of claimed-for autochthony at the expense of others. However it does not exclude them, at least not to the extent that one single category (e.g. race) takes over and monopolizes other axes involved. It will be the responsibility of close-up empirical exploration to develop theoretical statements about the relative position of autochthony within a specific social context. In the following two sections, we explore in more detail intersectionality and everyday life and autochthony, as framings for a research agenda that grasps the complexity and dynamics of belonging as it relates to Brexit.

### **Social positioning, politically framed in-/exclusion and the bordered intersectional everyday**

Borders can be regarded as dynamic and creative discontinuities that play a crucial role in encouraging the multiple, complex interplay between political and territorial, as well as cultural and identitarian processes (Popescu, 2012). Bordering processes are made through practices, whether these are aimed at maintaining and strengthening them or at disrupting or subverting them (Reid, Graham & Nash 2013, p.5). These practices operationalize ‘symbols, signs, identifications, representations, performances and stories’ (van Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer, 2005). As we have argued above, to fully understand bordering emerging within the Brexit context – which is very much about rebordering, i.e. the re-making of borders – we need to

incorporate into our analysis both vernacular and situated intersectional perspectives (Yuval-Davis, 2014). The latter emphasizes the necessity to develop a multi-epistemological approach, which considers the interrelationship between everyday practices and political struggles. It recognises the need to analyse Brexit as a dialogical, scale-transcending process, encompassing the situated gazes, knowledge and imaginations of the distinct social agents, emotional attachments and value systems involved (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

The early categorical approach developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) described intersectionality as multiple overlays and intersections of a limited number of axes of inequality, i.e. class, race and gender. According to Leslie McCall (2005) such inter-categorical understandings must be told apart from intra-categorical approaches because intersectionality is not simply determined by abstract categories or gross axes of inequality; rather, it is continually embodied and enacted. It emerges within particular situations that individuals and social groups experience in everyday life (Winker and Degele, 2009). By integrating both perspectives, the latest approach of 'situated intersectionality' (Yuval-Davis, 2015, 2016; Anthias, 2013) references the manifold sites of emergence of inequality, and their multi-scalar implications. Situated intersectionality may refer to seemingly unrelated items such as age, the availability of economic resources, access to citizenship or gender roles, but it also addresses 'nearby' items of social practice, e.g. the social image of an urban neighbourhood, local access to housing, and felt or aspired belonging to a local community. It therefore emphasizes the social divisions created by everyday bordering. These may relate to different degrees of citizenship or the exposure of groups and individuals to state and border control, often relocated to everyday

‘checkpoints’ where certain social groups are supposed to produce identity documents.

Intersectionality analysis thus relates to the manifold (re)distribution of power and other resources through social practice and does not reduce the complexity of power constructions into a single social division, as has been prevalent, for instance, in neo-Marxist stratification theory which would privilege class divisions (Anthias, 2001). The approach sees different social divisions as mutually constituted and shaped in a particular place-time (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, forthcoming); different social divisions constitute each other but are irreducible to each other – each of them has a different ontological discourse of particular dynamics of power relations, exclusion and/or exploitation, using a variety of legitimate and illegitimate technologies of inferiorizations, intimidations and sometimes actual violence to achieve this (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Assuming a multi-localized and multi-dimensional emergence of inequality, we must account for the social positioning of the social agent – the researcher or the researched – and challenge ‘the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere’ (Haraway 1991: 189) as a cover and a legitimisation of a hegemonic masculinist ‘positivistic’ positioning. In Brexit this means avoiding essentialising discourses across UK society and beyond. Just as there is not one EU migrant positioning, so there is also not one ‘Brexiteer’ or ‘Remainer’ positioning. Hence there are different facets of social analysis that must be elaborated upon by careful empirical exploration. Social actors are positioned along socio-economic grids of power; they develop experiential and identificatory perspectives of where they belong; and they think and act in terms of their normative value systems. These different facets are related to each other; they need to be studied as autonomous entities but also through their interrelatedness,

rather than assuming that they are automatically implied by each other as identity politics tend to do.

### **Politics of belonging and autochthony: altered modes of in-/exclusion**

Autochthonic politics can be defined as the return of the local within the context of globalization (Geschiere, 2009: 1). Such politics imply strong claims for primordiality and particular forms of temporal-territorial racialization, of exclusion and inferiorization. Although they allude to traditional concepts of ‘natural’ belonging, autochthonic politics nevertheless are the outcome of mass immigration occurring under the impetus of globalization: they afford the relatively new presence of particular people and collectivities in particular places.

Geschiere claims that ‘autochthony’ is a new phase of ethnicity. However it may be argued that it even surpasses ethnicity, which is highly constructed, relationally and situationally circumscribed, and therefore has particular time-space limits, as evidenced by categories such as the segregated settlement of ethnic groups. Following Geschiere, autochthony must rather be conceived as a much more ‘empty’ and thus elastic notion (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, forthcoming). It is based upon the simple notion that ‘I was here before you’ and can, therefore, be re-defined and (re)applied in any situation.

Acknowledging the multi-relational and multi-purpose quality of autochthony requires reflection on the arbitrary nature of insider-outsider relations. From a praxeological standpoint, as developed by the concept of situated intersectionality, virtually everything can serve as a feature of distinction between the local and the non-local. This view is supported by former studies on local insider-outsider relations, such as that carried out by Elias and Scotson (1965). They minutely described the

social context of post-war local history as constitutive of the practices of othering established by those who claimed to be autochthonous by their longer time of presence in a particular place. The older residents of a small community in the Midlands built up a habitus of superiority over newcomers by claiming that they had been there before, belonged to 'old families' and that the newcomers did not live up to more or less arbitrary standards that had already been established. The new residents not only belonged to a lower class but also had the 'wrong' manners, attitudes and other features that were defined and established by the autochthons as valid criteria for exclusion.

This observation stemming from a completely different social setting emphasises the transgressive nature of the social construct of autochthony. It is not simply situated in the sense that it may originate from a singular event or configuration of social actors. It also implies a type of universality, which lies in the general openness of ascription that takes place. Some basic criteria of exclusion (such as a longer duration of residence, historical rights, a long-term genealogy of a group or society) seem to have a 'convincing' effect as they provide locals with powerful claims that cannot be suspended easily. These claims may touch upon ethnicity, class, gender, age, but they transcend them because there is always something that outsiders cannot imitate or acquire – even up to the claim that there is a collective spirit that outsiders cannot be part of. This dynamism of keeping others at a distance had been identified by Elias and Scotson (1965) as a matter of local conflict, generated by general post-war socio-spatial mobility within a narrower national context of economic upswing. Claims for autochthony obviously served as a lubricant for connecting the situational with the general.

By analogy the difference that present-day globalization makes may only be gradual. It might owe itself to accelerated mobility, new complex geographies and temporalities, which are increasingly leading to a 'liquid migration' (Engbersen, 2012) with individualized and unpredictable patterns through the open borders of multiple countries. Therefore it seems that pronounced politics of autochthony which had already been applied in former periods of social and political change are now becoming ever more popular. However this assumption needs more empirical substantiation to be transformed into a sustainable conceptual framework. Comparative studies of different historical situations would contribute to a better understanding of the origins and implementations of claims for autochthony.

Furthermore in the age of reinforced globalization individuals willingly or unwillingly relate to each other on an unprecedented worldwide scale and pace. Among international migrants there is a strong sense of uprootedness, in spite of their expectation of easy accommodation to unfamiliar places. They need to make social and cultural 'investments' in belonging, partly because they feel they have to become more independent from exclusionary practices of locals they meet during their migration. Belonging therefore may refer to larger communities of 'autochthones' but existing exclusion often prevents it. Hence there are also strong aspirations by minorities to belong to smaller groups created by intersectional positioning, everyday bordering and exclusion – which makes it easier for those who 'had been there before' to perpetuate the state of affairs and claim that autochthony is a natural state of being. In the era of globalization making 'investments' in belonging has turned out to be a widespread and universal phenomenon, which also involves the permanent population. Facing the challenge of global reflexivity (Beck et al, 2003), expressed by quickly shifting markets, social relations and political conditions, it is for many

non-mobile residents rational to claim that they really belong – to a social community, a network of friends (including social media, see Metykova 2010), or a particular place. However there is a considerable gap between such claims and actual projects of ‘making belonging come true’. Therefore Yuval-Davis (2011) argues that we should differentiate between belonging and its politics. She associates the former with feeling ‘at home’ in a way that can become naturalized; the latter relates to the creating of a collective concept of home. So the idea of ‘home’ is linked to views on who has a right to share the home and who does not belong within it. Often such politics remain latent, unarticulated, until (as with Brexit) some form of ‘threat’ is produced and the objective of belonging becomes articulated, formally structured and pronouncedly politicized.

### **The staging of autochthonic politics of belonging by Brexit: a research agenda**

So far we have discussed the politics of belonging as a phenomenon that arises out of particular social practices, often from the perspective of migrants and people who have to find a legitimation to ‘be there’ or to join a community after having crossed political borders. The role of insiders or locals is still underrepresented, mainly because there is limited empirical evidence available – see for example the recent *At Home in Europe* report on Manchester, part of a six-city series on the white working class (Open Society Foundations, 2014). The following considerations propose a potential research agenda, which focuses on the ‘autochthonous’ groups of the population and the politics of belonging that addresses them as Brexit unfolds. Three analytical subjects appear to be promising:

- i) Belonging through everyday rebordering and multidimensional immigration control;



- ii) Belonging through political projects, e.g. state citizenship;
- iii) Belonging through political and media discourses reflecting the British sense of otherness/distinction.

*i) Belonging through everyday rebordering and immigration control*

Everyday rebordering often refers to nationalist distinctions of otherness. But who practically belongs to the British society and who does not? This question is not banal; it cannot be reduced to the question of state citizenship but has much more to do with cultural connectivity and the everyday negotiation of inclusion. Innocenti (2015) has argued that from racism to xenophobia, from religious intolerance to gender and sexual discrimination, we are surrounded by evidence that cultural beliefs are sometimes in conflict with principles of equality as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. From this perspective, processes of preservation and transmission of cultural identities require a necessary selection and appraisal on the basis of human rights and equal societies. These are the true challenges and hard work of intercultural dialogue and cultural citizenship.

State citizenship would automatically include everyone from the former British colonies but it is clear that people of colour stemming from these regions are not easily accepted. Nonetheless, we have recently seen growing discomfort in Britain over the exclusion of long-settled migrants from the former colonies through everyday bordering. The so-called ‘Windrush scandal’, provided a clear example of the shifting boundaries of autochthonous belonging, when demands were made for the inclusion of a group excluded by changes in immigration policy (primarily since 2014) on a ‘exceptional’ basis – that of their contribution to the British economy and

society, but also, importantly, on the basis that they were specifically ‘invited’ to the UK and ‘belonged’ to her Empire. Much of the discourse supporting the rights of the Windrush migrants was actively framed in such a way as to highlight their difference from those who have migrated from Europe in particular in more recent times (Harewood, 2018; Younge, 2018). Although there is some state effort towards voluntary inclusion, everyday resentments and factual discrimination continue to have their effects. In particular, the maelstrom of intersectionality not only continues, it is even likely to be reinforced by the individually felt request to personally decide who or what is autochthonous or compatible with an imagined ‘home’. Who claims to have always ‘been there’? Does the imagined British ‘we’ during and after Brexit include a different selection of people (with different features) than before? In which ways does it go beyond former ethnic or racial lines of demarcation?

As these few considerations demonstrate, the quest for belonging creates an arena where the conditions of in/exclusion are negotiated against the backdrop of intersectionality and flexible criteria of autochthony. In practice, *autochthonic* politics of belonging is superior to other types of social exclusion because it has a very positive connotation. Who can oppose the objective of feeling at home? The contemporary populist extreme right politics of which a large part of Brexit is an example claims just that (Dathan, 2015). Supporters can argue that they are ‘not racist’, although they are very much against all those who ‘do not belong’. At the same time they claim that they are against any ‘dilution’ of nation and culture as a result of those who do not belong being allowed entry into the country.

*ii) Belonging through political projects*

Belonging through political projects is the other, formal side of the quest for belonging, which nevertheless has important everyday implications. Political projects of belonging seek to construct particular collectivities with specified boundaries, often relating to a locality/territory (Antonsich, 2010). The project with which many of us are most familiar is state citizenship. Whilst the UK permits dual citizenship, political discourse often challenges those who claim expansive belonging well beyond one nation-state. For example, in 2016 Theresa May stated, 'if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere'. Citizenship provides a formal frame for developing relevant signifiers of belonging, e.g. individual and collective traits which stand for particular homogeneities (Yuval-Davis, 2011). By assembling more or less homogeneous subgroups under the umbrella of the nation state control of diversity is managed. Complete homogeneity is not needed as long as there is a general consensus about the usefulness of the state. When people travel to other countries they are usually identified by their nationality-expressed-through-state citizenship, although this subsumes the individual under a category where he often does not want to be. Social inequality and the everyday contestation of belonging easily 'disappear' under the impact of formal identification, leaving an uneasy feeling of heteronomy. Brexit is liable to reinforce such a sense of heteronomy as it demands everyone take an unequivocal stand. The polarization of the British population into 'Brexiters' and 'Remainers' is a project of homogenization under the banner of autochthony, with unclear effects for the actual sense of belonging that resides under the cover of what can be formally (re)produced. Imaginaries of dichotomous alternatives may override more complex individual positionings and related belongings so that many 'undesirable' or 'inappropriate' orientations are made visible. They might render 'other' people as non-belonging although at the level of

everyday practices they do not interfere with other members of the civil society. Such labelling of ‘deviant’ individuals and groups under state surveillance has been practiced since the ‘global war on terrorism’ when many started to be identified everywhere by their presumed religious affiliation. This collective experience and its homogenizing effect might have built a basis on which the dichotomous orientation and decision pro vs. con Brexit has been established. Moreover, it has the side effect of rendering intersectionality and the making of inequality invisible – they simply disappear under the cover of dichotomous ascriptions. This effect may be politically desirable for those who seek to manage uncertainties and systemic destabilization during a period of radical change.

There is still another impact that the state has on the formation of autochthony. ‘Undesirable’ racial or religious belonging is not as important in everyday othering as the general construction of people as non-belonging. Agamben (1995, p. 114) has pointed out that refugees are constructed around a major paradox: ‘in the nation-state system, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterise them as rights of citizens of a state’. He further adds that ‘by breaking up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, the refugee throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty’ (Agamben, 1995, p.115). A deeper driver of homogenization than the one described in the preceding paragraph might therefore exist in political fears of admitting the crisis of sovereignty beyond its symbolic visibility in the key figure of the refugee. Brexit poses a fundamental crisis of sovereignty as it forces the state to re-claim what it partially had delegated to the EU, e.g. an undisputed legislation or the right to devise external policies at (national) will.

The political rationale of keeping together what might get lost by negligence virtually affords an imaginary of solid autochthony.

*iii) Belonging through political and media discourses reflecting the British sense of otherness/distinction*

During the recent economic and political EU crisis the national media often renounced their former role as independent commentators on political struggles, openly aligning themselves with an assumed ‘right’ cause and the ‘right’ conflict partners. While subjective claim making has been an important long-term feature of media journalism operating within the EU’s political public (Pfetsch, Adam & Eschner, 2010), recent crises seemed to further deepen such alignments. This was evident in the Ukraine crisis where ‘western’ media sought to establish a homogeneous view of the old and new ‘cold war enemy’ Russia (Barthel & Bürkner, forthcoming). A similar way of engaging in polarized debates can be observed in domestic media representations of Brexit where support for a particular cause seems to prevail. While polarization and the exaggeration of opposition or conflict has always been the domain of the media, for their visibility and economic viability, the current wave of polarized coverage and commentary clearly exceeds former media practices.

In particular, there is a pronounced bias in favour of everything that indicates the importance of being British, being at home, or defending one’s home against alien impact. This comes with a detailed rejection of such impact, including descriptions of potentially adverse or harmful agents representing the ‘other’ side. In political terms the EU, its regulations, politicians and the heads of continental national governments are easily identified as potential or factual opponents. These

representations range from exaggerated suggestions concerning the influence that EU regulations have over the shape of the bananas being sold in Britain (Johnson, 2016 cited in Simons, 2016) to narratives that heads of state from the EU's largest nation-states held too much power over decision-making within the EU (Farage, 2016). Also the visible outcomes of lacking immigration control or other 'defence' against non-British influence, fostered by EU practices, are placed under suspicion of not fully belonging, including migrants and other social representatives of failed EU policies. This imaginary of 'us against the EU', endlessly repeated in reports across the whole political spectrum of the media, has established a solid sense of autochthony beyond formal political objectives and everyday social practices. It has laid the foundations of what might be called 'autochthony as common sense': everybody who wants to be regarded as a reasonable citizen should know where his/her home is and where he/she belongs, regardless if he/she is a 'Brexit' or 'Remainer'. Increasingly, it has been suggested that this 'Us' and process of rebordering the EU involves a debordering of citizens of Britain's former Empire, whether through a form of nostalgia (Harewood, 2018; Younge, 2018), through the exceptional treatment of Windrush migrants within the wider 'hostile environment' or the re-imagining of Ireland as non-European (Bassett, 2018 cited in Halligan, 2018). However, these discourses are undermined by the promise of a new 'mobility framework' within the Chequers White Paper, which suggests a continued preferential positioning for EU citizens, whilst at the same time setting up the same possibilities for 'other close trading partners in the future' (HM Government, 2018). Nonetheless, the normative underpinning of otherwise existing political orientations, feelings, and imaginaries may support and legitimize processes of othering that have already been implied in a variety of social practices. The feeling that one naturally belongs to the 'better' or 'legitimate' side of things may

now give more impetus to the repulsion of what has been identified as being different or alien.

### **Conclusion: autochthony as an ambiguous collective project**

In this paper we have argued that Brexit has given the everyday concept of autochthony new importance, revealing a multifaceted arena of negotiating social inequality, in/exclusion, intersectionality, othering and belonging. This complexity of constructing a 'home' clearly exceeds former nationalist representations and practices of 'being British' or belonging to the UK. It affects the very foundations of society in that it demands dichotomous decisions pro or con, an assumed commonality which can only partly be shared by many, has probably never existed before and cannot be achieved, except at the cost of complete social homogeneity or totalitarian rule.

We have suggested that in spite of its basic inconsistency the social construct of autochthony is appealing for politics, the media, social majorities and minorities alike. For those national power elites it promises to unite a deeply unsettled and fragmented society, making social inequality and intersectionality a temporarily forgotten or secondary issue. For the powerless or non-established, it promises to create a pathway to inclusion that had formerly been barred by ethnic, racial, gender-related and other traits. The dark side of autochthony, however, lies in the arbitrariness of the criteria of in/exclusion, and in the uncertain outcomes of the various politics of belonging favoured by majorities and minorities. Claims for creating a new home, and demands for confessing the 'right' belonging, might create new dividing lines between social groups and individuals based on othering and rebordering. These divisions might be harder to overcome than older ones because they are fuzzy (Fowler, 2002), situational and exposed to arbitrary contestation.

Compared to class struggles or racial conflict they make it more difficult for everyone to create a sustainable sense of belonging and not to interfere with rapidly shifting lines of distinction or exclusion. As a result, for those with experience in building solidarities and alliances to resist more traditional tropes of exclusion, these new autochthonic politics are not only challenging, but can also make resistance along these lines seem out-dated and irrelevant. Situated intersectionality, enhanced by shifting social ascriptions and flexible social practices, may become an increasingly important feature of the social transformation that Brexit has initiated.

In particular, prevalent understandings of autochthony, which at the beginning had supposedly been defined by societal majorities, may now set the agenda over shifting modes of in-/exclusion. These understandings might embrace minorities, which were formerly excluded, and they might also create new lines of social demarcation, which delimit the choices that minorities have when developing their standpoints and senses of belonging. Intersectionality, then, is not only a matter of accumulating axes of exclusion but of incorporating them into a shifting field of everyday negotiations about autochthonic belonging, which gender theory had formerly attributed to a more or less unchangeable set of framing conditions. Rather, the present turmoil takes basic dispositions of 'intersectional' social positioning right into the middle of a shifting field of widening negotiations about autochthonous belonging. This gives individual axes of inequality an unusual embedding and provokes their situational reorientation. It follows that exclusion can be explained as emerging from a stream of ideation that is informed by constant and contingent reshaping of a general sense of belonging, which gives individual axes of inequality a particular leaning. We recommended that future research agendas focusing on political and social practices trace such dynamism of social integration/disintegration-by-autochthony in more detail. Brexit



provides a quasi-experimental research environment in that it places all social subjects between dichotomous belonging and the broadening of formerly tightly knit social divisions. The outcome is not only new individual and group struggles for enduring social positionings; there is also scope for extended political manipulation. Recent populist undertones in public discourses indicate that the political contestation of belonging is amongst the most intricate problems that 'managers' of Brexit will have to resolve.

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