

## The oddity of a Brexit odyssey By [Jamie Morgan](#)

*Globalizations* is a leading inter-disciplinary journal with an interest in political economy. It has notably published on exploitative work practices, the Arab Spring, land grabs, climate change, and the power asymmetries and future prospects of governance processes. The journal recently organized a special forum on Brexit. The forum includes contributions from many points of view: British history, the history of European integration, the role of class, the rise of the Global City, the influence of economic theory on the scope of labour practices, and the prospects for inequality, crises, and dissolution. Contributors include well-known post-Keynesians, political economists, Marxists, and European public intellectuals (James Galbraith, Bob Jessop, Ann Pettifor, Heikki Patomäki, Peter Wahl, Boris Kagarlitsky and more).

In editing these essays, it became clear to Heikki and I that Brexit is an extremely odd event. It was all too predictable at the same time as appearing unlikely, right up until the vote was counted. Nigel Farage of UKIP had already conceded and the senior Leave proponents were visibly shocked (and not a little afraid), when they realised they had won. The context of the vote and the consequences from it also seem to involve varieties of change without change. Brexit seems likely to result in serious social and economic consequences for Britain, but involves also basic degrees of continuity of policy frames within neoliberalism and its governance practices.

There is, for example, a clear narrative shift from the pre-referendum Treasury Budget Report, March 2016. In the Report, on the basis that EU members are Britain's most proximate trading partners, and comprise 44% of its exports, membership of the EU was positioned as a powerful force encouraging a more open, cosmopolitan British trading economy. However, the Leave campaign and the post-referendum government have repositioned EU membership as a constraint on a globally progressive open Britain (free to now flourish in a 'post-geography trading world'). Again, this is odd (and for more than the obvious reason that Britain looks set to create barriers to trade with its nearest neighbours, whilst seeking to develop trade treaties - a notoriously contingent and protracted process - with far flung nations). It is odd be-

cause it is an argument ostensibly focused on economics but dominated by other political concerns. The argument from the Right of the Conservatives was dominated by old concerns with the sovereignty implications of the European Commission's Social Europe agenda of integration, rather than the realities of the Single Market. For the Left, by contrast, the EU has been captured by the Single Market agenda and is overly neoliberal, and thus increasingly divisive as a source of generalized exploitation and limited democratic accountability. For the Right, the EU has been insufficiently neoliberal, but the economic argument has been *coloured* by other issues.

Ultimately, British post-referendum policy seems conditioned by choices between varieties of neoliberalism. And yet there has been no simple mapping of influence and interest along economic lines. This too is odd. If one were to begin from a simple unified concept of 'capital' and then translate this into overwhelming influence based on interests, then leaving the EU would seem an unlikely event. So unlikely that the very idea of a referendum ought to have been suppressed by the 'powerful'. It jeopardizes the status and influence of the City of London as a premier finance centre, it creates uncertainty and dislocation for multinationals and influential corporations of all kinds (risking investment projects, affecting profits via currency instability, threatening inflationary pressures on costs that affect pricing, and creating the need for decisions firms would rather avoid). Brexit is a short-term headache for 'capital' and a long-term threat to some fractions within it. It seems like a defeat, a defeat articulated and orchestrated by a Right wing party that nominally represents 'capital'. Again, this is odd. It is less odd when one considers that the referendum was a response to nationalist populism by a Conservative government aiming to undercut its own (anti-Social Europe) Right wing, as well as the electoral threat it perceived from UKIP. The leadership simply did not believe they could lose. It is also less odd when one considers the campaign was partly bankrolled by a hedge fund billionaire who made millions shorting the markets.

In any case, Brexit has very quickly become an exercise

in damage limitation, posed as opportunity, and without any clear sense of what the Government is in a position to do. This is being represented as necessary secrecy as a form of negotiating strategy. But there is also something odd here. A person who campaigned for Britain to remain in the EU, not leave heads the new Government. Theresa May is not an enthusiastic Brexiteer, she was simply astute enough to say little and wait for the other major figures in her party to damage each other. She has also been astute enough to place several of the main Leave campaigners in her Cabinet -- not because she has great confidence in them, but rather because they will then own any disasters that follow. This makes for good personal politics (self-preservation of the PM), but not necessarily coherent and effective policy. Britain now has 3 people directly delegated to plan and negotiate Brexit. David Davis, heads the Department for Exiting the EU, Liam Fox, is responsible for international trade outside the EU, and Boris Johnson is foreign secretary. However, though delegated none of the 3 are yet institutionally empowered. Davis cannot negotiate with individual EU members until the EU has collectively agreed a position in response to Article 50. The UK is still an EU member and the EU is collectively responsible for trade treaty negotiations beyond its borders, so Fox has no clear institutional mandate. Johnson's position sits between these two, as simply a diplomatic voice intended to enhance Britain's presence and gravitas in the world (and, yes, everything about that statement seems like self-refuting parody even as I write it).

Moreover, these 3 are ultimately answerable to the Treasury and the Chancellor, who must incorporate any new institutional arrangements into Britain's emerging economic structure. Furthermore, all 3 must come to terms with the Home Secretary, who controls immigration policy (and so is where any special pleading regarding treatment of groups heavily dependent on foreign labour must take place -- notably for the finance sector, the health service, and agriculture). The situation is, therefore, already one involving 5 different groupings, each with their own concerns and personnel. The simple mantra that 'Brexit means Brexit' is already about as meaningful as any stanza from the Jabberwocky.

Still, the immigration issue looms large and introduces a further oddity. Immigration dominated the media coverage that led up to the referendum. However, actual voting patterns have been interpreted along several different lines, each emphasizing some particular primary cause of the vote. Did people vote Leave as the 'left behind' or economically disadvantaged, simply to hurt the establishment, did they vote based on moral panic regarding ethnicity, immigration and fears over social cohesion and cultural change (perhaps involving nostalgia for some imagined past), or did they vote based on differing ideas of governance -- an autocratic 'us versus

them' mentality of control and of strong borders? Perhaps it was some combination of all of these, creating contradictory impulses and schizoid confusions -- exacerbated by the stark absence of reasoned argument in public discourse (and more worrying, an active hostility to reasoned argument -- strongly held belief was considered at least as important as evidence).

In the end though, it seems less significant what combination motivated the vote, and more significant that the consequences of the vote seem unlikely to be compatible with meeting *all* motives and expectations. More control over migration requires quite different approaches to regulation and an increasingly closed economy. This pits two core aspects of neoliberalism against each other, free flows of labour and free flows of goods and capital. This too seems odd, an internal division of policy within a set of principles that we have grown accustomed to thinking of as ideologically dominant in combination. The conflict, however, seems to be creating constraints and choices that are unlikely to satisfy any of those who voted Leave, at least as long as the framework remains neoliberal. This, of course, is the big question that waits to be answered. It is a question about the future prospects for democracy and for economies.

Are protectionism and retrenchment going to be 'solutions' to the negative aspects of globalization? There are currently many centripetal and centrifugal forces in play that could dissolve the current terms of globalization, and that could, for example, bind or dissolve the EU. Brexit as a problem posed only for Britain tells one little about this directly. However, perhaps the state of democracy in Britain tells one something. In the last 9 years Britain has only had 1 year in which (even by first past the post majoritarian standards) it has had a leadership that the electorate thought it had voted for. And it isn't now (it was David Cameron, from 2015 to 2016). All other power transitions since 2007 have been internal to parties or compromises between parties. This too is odd. It seems unique, but the issue of accountability and sense of enfranchisement is a far more generalised problem. It is one that only greater participation on different terms than today can rectify.

Odysseus required 10 years to travel home to Ithaca from Troy. Brexit seems more of an interminable journey to nowhere. Sir Thomas More's work traded on this lack of place to imagine something better, and so 'no-place' has become synonymous with an ideal place, Utopia. The Britain and Europe of ten years from now seem unimaginable to me. Fortunately, others have more foresight and much of that is signposted in the contributions set out in *Globalizations*. These can be found at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/showAxaArticles?journalCode=rglo20>