



## Brexit One Year On: Introducing the Special Issue

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## **Brexit One Year On: Introducing the Special Issue**

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2016 is widely being portrayed as a year which will 'live in infamy.' Dramatic and unexpected political events in the United States, and the United Kingdom seemed to signal a revolt against globalization among significant parts of the population and certain sections of the political elite. The election of Donald Trump saw the first explicitly anti-free trade U.S. President for over a century. The June 2016 referendum in the UK produced a 52 per cent majority voting for Britain to leave the European Union. Both of these election results produced shock waves in the political establishment. To some these developments and their rhetorical aftermath represent a triumph for the peculiar position of right-wing anti-free trade populism, a position that had been marginal given the dominance of the tenets and practices of market globalism (Steger, 2013). This position tries to balance some powerful and seemingly incommensurate competing forces: it promotes market forces and global capitalism, but also tries to restrict migration, to reject transnational governance structures, and to restate economic nationalism. Isolationist, xenophobic, unilateralist and economic-nationalist politicians in other Western European states such as France and the Netherlands look to be emboldened by these unexpected electoral results.

Many commentators have characterized the Brexit vote as a protest by the disaffected and disenfranchised. A considerable population seems to have voted 'Leave' as a kind of protest; so distant were they from elite interests or from middle class opinion that they voted 'Leave' as some form of attack on the centres of influence that they claim have ignored them for decades. Global capitalism is, of course, associated with a rapid rise of economic inequality and social exclusion (Dorling, 2014; Steger, 2013). Populations who have 'lost out' or have been rendered largely irrelevant by market globalism are often indifferent or

apathetic towards democracy. But in this instance the anti-EU votes of those 'left behind' by globalization, when combined with the more traditionally anti-EU Conservative and/or rural vote, seems to have played a major role in tipping the balance toward Brexit.

These developments are especially interesting as elite opinion-formers and power centres (with some important exceptions) are opposed to such populist anti-globalism. Technocrats, politicians, business leaders and most of the trade union movement are broadly pro-EU. Yet their position was rejected by British voters. Similarly in the United States, major employers and technology developers such as Google, Apple, Facebook and Microsoft have protested against Trump's isolationism and the imposition of new border and visa controls. Moderates appeal for calm and for a restoration of the normal order, emphasising the need to rescue globalization from the right wingers and populists who are trying to derail it (see, for example, the economist Stephen King's *Grave New World*, 2017). The discourses and the real-world processes of globalization appear suddenly endangered, not by the long-term 'justice globalization' critics on the left (Steger, 2013), but by insurgent right-wing populism, anti-intellectualism and anti-cosmopolitanism.

As editors of *Competition & Change* – an academic journal of globalization and financialization – these developments obviously struck us as potentially setting a new agenda or at least reinforcing one of globalization's particular counter-dynamics. Many have recognized that globalisation has always contained its own peculiar countertrends, paradoxes and contradictions. But Brexit and related phenomena have crystallized a position of right-wing populism, a kind of partial anti-globalization that awkwardly coexists alongside and is now somehow enmeshed into the mainstream market globalist position of the establishment. This new right-wing populism is hostile towards migration, opposed to transnational governance and dismissive toward professional experts (judiciary, academia, journalism, among others). It tries to wind back the clock to a position of national economic governance, including strict migration controls, the possible introduction of tariffs, the annulment of transnational trading agreements, and the attempts to re-introduce 'state aids' and national 'industrial strategies'. Mainstream or 'first wave' globalization literature of the early 1990s claim that globalization is inevitable and irreversible. These have always been questioned by a range of critics and skeptics (Martell, 2007). But today elements and visions of globalization are suddenly on the defensive.

Globalization is commonly understood as a process that weakens nation states and national governance. But Brexit itself was made possible through the classical Enlightenment processes and norms of the parliamentary law making process. Amid the sound and fury of high-frequency trading, global digital communication networks, social media, and 'alternative facts', ultimately Brexit became a reality through counting bits of marked paper placed into sealed boxes. If enough of these bits of paper tip the balance over 50 per cent then politicians are allowed to create a narrative of 'the people's will', to re-invent themselves as hard Eurosceptics, and to start the historic and extremely uncertain process of withdrawing the country from European Union. This reminds us of the social construction of globalization (Ray, 2007). Globalization and its internal counterforces, while often striking us initially as remote, forceful, immutable and inevitable, actually depend on all kinds of contingent events and interpretations. The unexpected 'Leave' vote gave new voice to certain forms of anti-globalism, anti-cosmopolitanism, and anti-intellectualism that comprised separate or overlapping positions, and the circulation of these voices has created a cacophony of competing counterclaims and stimulated some very divisive processes of 'othering'. The Brexit results and its aftermath exposed and created all kinds of new and unusual political, regional, social, cultural, ethnic and class-based divisions, continuing and accelerating a process over the last few decades whereby 'politics as usual' has been progressively fragmented and disturbed with 'the centre ground' now seemingly attenuated and uncertain.

Brexit is especially interesting in that liberal and left critics are accustomed to assuming that 'the powers that be' will tend to get what they want from an election; see for example the recent work by political scientists Gilens and Page (2014) which suggests that average citizens lacking lobbying resources have almost zero influence on policy. Many of Britain's most important centres of power and interest groups (Parliament, business and their organisations, trade unions) supported 'Remain'. But the result confounded this picture. It is worth indicating that the EU has struggled to present a coherent and attractive picture of itself and its values, and has always faced a British media that is predominantly hostile towards it. Populist anti-EU politicians such as Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party could easily score points by openly attacking the EU and its 'faceless' leaders, given the widespread indifference and ignorance on the part of the British public as regards the EU's

structures and philosophies. There is certainly a strong sense in which underprivileged people voting for Brexit probably reflects these media discourses of a remote, costly, irrelevant EU, and that many voters surely believed that leaving Europe will somehow make Britain stronger and will signal an end to 'uncontrolled' migration. On the other hand, British working class habitus has often exhibited an anti-power sentiment, and in some sense is radical in refusing to play a rigged game. A classic example would be the basically self-destructive behaviour of the schoolchildren portrayed in Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977), who would wilfully ignore their teachers and refuse to expend any effort on education and training. Willis argues that such was the level of their real exclusion from the prospects of meaningful employment and social elevation, that being disobedient made sense by a certain twisted logic. The process of Britain deliberately breaking away from Europe - despite the widespread expert claims that this will be self-destructive - almost transposes the self-harming position of Willis' 'lads' to the level of national policy.

As Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick and Richard Hyman shows in their article in this special issue, the vote to leave the EU will almost certainly bring no material or social benefits to working people. Legal and institutional protections for workers are likely to be stripped back by a Conservative government, and Brexit will likely weaken the international labour movement. But a reader of Alex Callinicos' article might question the real value of the social goods that the EU project ever really granted towards workers in recent years. At heart, he suggests that the EU is broadly a neoliberal project, as was Tony Blair's 'New' Labour. Lisa Mckenzie's article provides detailed and emotive narratives that illuminate the depth of working people's disaffection and pessimism about expert-led market globalism. They simply do not see how national or European politics or business has done anything to reverse their precarious lives, and their indifference, lack of confidence, or open hostility towards the EU project become more understandable in this light. The article by Lorenza Antonucci and colleagues provide a forensic analysis of the vote by examining questions of education and class and they conclude that the Brexit vote extended beyond the 'squeezed middle'. Andreas Noelke questions whether Brexit and the elections of Donald Trump are really exceptional developments, or whether they should be viewed as part of a sea change in the political economy of global capitalism. He posits a somewhat less pessimistic interpretation of Brexit and Trumpism, claiming their real meanings are perhaps less

dramatic than they currently appear. States have always tried to develop national economic strategies of various kinds, and the economy can never be fully disembedded from national institutions. Viewed from a more international and historical standpoint, Brexit might look much like other attempts at developing some kind of nationally-bounded economic system, much like 'organized capitalism' in Germany or 'Abenomics' in Japan. It remains to be seen how successful these tactics can be. At the time of writing, the Conservative government seems to be positioning itself for a 'hard' Brexit and no-one yet seems particularly excited by the UK's 'modern industrial strategy' and its 'digital skills strategy'. Is it really feasible for the UK to sidestep the EU and to develop 'a global Britain', in accordance with Prime Minister Theresa May's claims? What would 'a global Britain' look like and how would it differ from a Britain in Europe? Would 'a global Britain' be at all willing and able to address poverty and social exclusion?

Perhaps it is inevitable that much of the media discussion thus far is heavy on rhetoric and light on understanding. The search for blame and retribution is not helpful in this regard. Like the deeply contested notion of 'globalization' itself, its meanings, interpretations, and impacts can be contradictory. As this special issue is published we are only one year on from the historic Brexit vote and we are in uncharted territory. Clearly nobody can at this stage do much more than speculate about its potential longer-term impact. The apocryphal story of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai comes to mind. He was supposed to have commented in 1972 that it is 'too early to say' what the impact of the French Revolution might be. But, as with much in the world of global politics, something might have been lost in translation (he might have been referring to Paris 1968). In any case we hope that these five articles will at least provide a stimulating and enduring discussion of these contradictory developments that threatens to herald a new and deeply problematic era for global capitalism, and seem certain to generate a whole new cycle of rhetorical claims and counterclaims.

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