Brexiting CMS: Critically studying Brexit and its consequences

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On the 23rd of June 2016 the electorate of the United Kingdom voted by a slim majority to leave the European Union, setting the course for what has become known as ‘Brexit’. However, Scotland, Northern Ireland, London and most metropolitan areas with universities voted overwhelmingly to remain. To some, this momentous event may indicate the largest popular rebellion against the establishment within the UK in modern history – a dramatic (and traumatic) comeback of, in particular, those groups and sections of the population most affected (and disaffected) by the worst of the austerity measures (Wahl, 2016; Worth, 2016). For some, it is an expression of a globally resurgent ethno-nationalism (reaching from USA, to France, Russia, Poland and Hungary) that challenges key aspects of neo-liberal globalisation from the political right. Others, particularly in Europe, see it somewhat less dramatically as a continuation of the ways in which Britain has negotiated a special status within the EU for decades.

Without a doubt, however, Brexit has triggered and continues to generate shock waves. These stretch to political, economic, institutional and organisational turbulence, and anxiety and fear, as the potential enormity of the impact on individuals, organisations, institutions and nations starts to unfold. The Brexit vote can be seen as a ‘moment of suspended disbelief’, creating a discontinuity where previous norms and rules of engagement no longer automatically apply, and where earlier accepted values and practices are up for negotiation (Guldi, 2016). Britain is poised in the balance between conflicting and competing futures – such as the restoration of welfare state as advocated by Corbyn versus further neoliberalisation, as well as darker, more dystopian scenarios (ibid.). Furthermore, with the questions of the unity of the United Kingdom and the continuation of the EU very much on the agenda, Brexit is undeniably a phenomenon of global significance (Galbraith, 2016; Patomäki, 2016; Wahl, 2016).

Whilst Brexit is still very much a phenomenon-in-the-making – being ‘so polyvalent a notion and so complex a process that its present meaning is hard to define and its future trajectory hard to discern’ (Jessop, 2016:7), it is in need of urgent critical scrutiny. In the UK, one of the most apparent and shocking features in the wake of the vote has been the surge in hatred attacks, including those engendering racism, xenophobia, and homophobia, with some media reporting as much as a 147% rise in July, August and September 2016 following the June referendum (Lusher, 2016). Although racism, xenophobia and associated behaviour have always been present in the British society, Brexit seems to have legitimised the expression of belief in their legitimacy (Stewart, 2016), leaving Britain deeply divided along the lines of not only race and nationality, but also age, class, education, regional differences and urbanisation (Hobolt, 2016; Toly,
From the murders of MP Jo Cox and Polish worker Arkadiusz Jóźwik to almost daily attacks on foreign looking and speaking UK residents, written and verbal abuse and general expressions of hostility taking place on the streets, on public transport, in the workplaces, and on social media, the referendum has unleashed brutal forces that add to the uncertainty following the referendum result. Conversely, anti-racist and anti-hatred campaigns and movements, such as the #SafetyPin campaign, the Avaaz ‘Reject Racism’ campaign and Not Foreign (which, at the time of writing has collected more than 10,000 signatures to their open letter to the Prime Minister calling on her ‘to put a stop to her government’s bitter, racist and divisive language’) point to the consolidation of forces rising to oppose the hatred surge.

As well as stirring up the murky waters of hatred, Brexit also appears to have bred what the press has been quick to describe as ‘a sinister strain of anti-intellectualism’ (Wright, 2016). The role of experts and intellectuals has been spurned and ridiculed by some politicians – most notoriously perhaps when as part of the Leave campaign Michael Gove was reported by the media as refusing to name any economists supporting Brexit, stating instead that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’ (Mance 2016). Agents in the referendum and the post-referendum debate have been reported to take unprecedented liberty with facts and the meaning of political promises. With all key referendum promises of the Leave campaign broken, exacerbating distrust in democratic institutions and elites, the anti-‘anti-science’ backlash seems to have been equally quick off the mark, with the labels of ‘postmodern politics’ freely attributed to the Leave campaign and the government’s management of Brexit, along with accusations of denials of the existence of ‘objective truth’ and permitting ‘relativism to let rip and damn the consequences’ (Wright, 2016). Brexit can thus be understood not only as the latest flare-up in the 200-year struggle between the expert-led state rule and the participatory democracy (Guldi, 2016), but also arguably as the latest salvo of the long-standing ‘science wars’ (Sardar, 2000) playing out in the broad political arena.

The questions over the legitimacy and relevance of experts and the nature of their knowledge make Brexit a core concern for academics in general and CMS academics in particular in terms of reflecting on our own knowledge, practice, impact and relevance. Added to this are concerns over our workplaces. The consequences for UK universities are manifold, as many of us question the possibility and expediency of following academic careers in the UK, European funding starts to be curtailed, the flow of European students starts to shrink, and European academic links and partnerships become harder to forge. Yet, as academics, we face the challenging task of not only living and working through Brexit, but also making sense of it as a phenomenon, of influencing policy and public opinion during and after Brexit negotiations, and of questioning and reinventing what we research and who and how we teach in Brexit and post-Brexit times.

Turning the lens on our own community, in this stream we therefore call for contributions that critically examine Brexit and the role of CMS in the aftermath of
Brexit. More specifically, this stream asks how, as an academic community that studies and questions many of the root causes and issues raised and unleashed by Brexit, the CMS community can put its weight behind efforts to 1) critically study the organisation of Brexit, the impact of Brexit on organisations, and role of organisations in Brexit, and 2) critically consider our role as researchers, educators and intellectuals in fostering constructive debate, challenging deep underlying racism, class, regional and other tensions, and dissipating the damaging effects and consequences of Brexit.

This stream invites contributions around, but not limited to, the following topics:

1) Critical analyses of Brexit
   - Analyses of underlying structural issues, causes and reasons relating to the Brexit vote
   - Studies of the organisation of the referendum campaigns, the branding and marketing of ‘Brexit’
   - Analyses of the subsequent management of Brexit itself and the role of political leaders (see Grint 2016)
   - Critical studies of media and social media and their role in Brexit, through the shaping and/or failing to shape public and political opinion
   - Examinations of the impact of Brexit on organisations, organisational reactions and their consequences
   - Examinations of the role of organisations in shaping Brexit; the role of organisations in shaping and/or failing to shape popular and political opinion
   - Analyses of absences, silences and margins – e.g. the voices of the disenfranchised, those who live and work in the United Kingdom who were not allowed to vote but who experience the consequences of the vote (most) acutely
   - Brexit and the workplace: tensions between colleagues and emotions at work
   - The behaviour of financial institutions, the role of the City of London and the effect of the fall of the pound
   - Critiques of EU management/governance from other European and non-European perspectives
   - Analyses of efforts to re-organise and repair after Brexit, the role of social movements and civil society
   - Theorisations of post-Brexit futures: what sort of world of work and organisational lives are we heading towards in post-Brexit times?

2) The Role of CMS and Academia in the Aftermath of Brexit
   - The role of CMS in formulating the Brexit and post-Brexit plans: to what extent and how should we be contributing? What should the contribution of CMS and academia in general be to the efforts to re-organise and repair during and after Brexit?
• Academia and Brexit: re-examining our own intellectual work and practice and responding to challenges to expert roles and intellectualism – e.g. reinventing and reclaiming the notions of ‘relevance’, ‘impact’, ‘public intellectual’, and ‘expert’ in post-Brexit context
• UK universities in the wake of Brexit: how can they challenge, resist, influence policy makers and retain European networks and partnerships? Or should they be focusing on connections outside Europe?
• Methodologies for studying the complexities of Brexit and its consequences, e.g., given that ‘what happens after a discontinuity is nevertheless informed by the models of the past’ (Guldi, 2016:6), developing historical approaches for understanding how and why Brexit came about
• Theorising Brexit and Brexit-ising theory: to what extent can we make sense of Brexit with existing theoretical tools (e.g. theories of leadership, change, power, resistance, race and class), or should it lead on to new theoretical developments?
• Revisiting Management Education and Critical Management Education in the light of Brexit: what have we been teaching, what should we be teaching, how do we prepare our students for post-Brexit work?
• CMS’s engagement with politics, policy and community in the wake of the Brexit-related unleashing and deepening of class, race and regional tensions
• CMS role in actively challenging racism, xenophobia, and homophobia

References


Grint, K. (2016) Dirty Hands and Clean Heels: 21 days of political leadership in the UK Leadership (online first)


**Stream Convenors**

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**Abstract submission and decisions**

Please submit an abstract of maximum 500 words to a.bristow@surrey.ac.uk
Abstract submission deadline is 31st of January 2017
Decisions on acceptance will be communicated to authors by 28th of February 2017

The conference will take place at Britannia Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool, UK from July 3 – 5 and hosted by Edge Hill University, UK.

More information about the conference can be found at:
https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/business/homepage/cms2017/