

Anarchy in the UK: Brexit style
Pop Up Salon at SASE Conference at the University of California at Berkeley
Summary Provided by Jacqueline O'Reilly, University of Brighton

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Anarchy in the UK broke out in the middle of the SASE conference at Berkeley. The aftermath of the Brexit referendum resulted in political and economic disarray: the Prime Minister resigned, the Shadow Cabinet imploded, and sterling plummeted. The Bank of England injected £3.1bn into UK banks, standing at the ready to provide an additional £250 billion to backstop markets. The causes of the referendum, aimed at subduing the right wing margins of the Conservative Party and stemming the rising tide of the "peoples army" of UKIP (the UK Independence Party), ended with major international repercussions, going well beyond the borders of the UK. Overall international reaction was one of shock. And it was one we needed to discuss.

Why did the Brexit result catch so many people by surprise? Should we have seen it coming? These were some of the questions we set out to discuss with a spontaneously organised pop up salon on the 25th June in the middle of the SASE conference.

Jacqueline O'Reilly, Research Director of CROME at the University of Brighton in the UK initiated and moderated the event briefly outlining the results.

<http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why>

Scotland voted "Remain;" Northern Ireland was divided; most of Wales and the rest of England voted "Leave." Support for "Remain" was strongest in the major cities of England, but "Leave" had secured a majority across the rest of the country. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36616028>

The electoral maps illustrated a very disunited kingdom, fractured along class, age and ethnic divisions. Some of the strongest support for "Leave" had been in traditional, disaffected and deindustrialised Labour heartlands amongst the manual working classes; but nearly half of the white-collar middle classes had also voted "Leave." A majority of the professional classes had voted "Remain." Those in work and those with a university education voted "Remain;" most of those not working and those who had left school at 18 or younger voted "Leave." "Leave" voters represented a broad coalition of disparate communities that did not cut neatly across class lines.

Young people (18-24) had overwhelmingly voted "Remain" but only 40% had turned out; older voters had turned out, and they voted "Leave." Black and Asian voters were more likely than

whites to vote “Remain.” Voters were segregated between regions, cities and provinces, across generations, classes and ethnic groups, as well as divided within families.

Looking for concepts to help us analyse this historically momentous decision, comparisons were made with the financial crisis of 2008. Concepts like deeply embedded fault lines, the impact of contagion, and the Polanyian idea of a double movement were discussed at the SASE conference and will be published in a Discussion Forum of the *Socio-Economic Review* in the autumn. But at the pop up salon we sought to capture immediate reaction from a number of international members of the SASE community. They provided a short initial reactions and interpretations.

Alexander Kentikelenis, a Junior Research Fellow in sociology and politics at the University of Oxford and participant at the SASE Early Career workshop, talked about the consequences for Greece and the prospects for young career researchers thinking of establishing a career in the UK.

Brian Nolan, economist, Professor of Social Policy and Director of the Programme Employment, Equity and Growth at the Institute for New Economic Thinking at the University of Oxford, raised three issues. First, why had so many supposedly well-informed people been caught off guard – what does that tell us about cleavages? What will the consequences be for Northern Ireland, where despite the success of the peace process the political situation remains fragile? And, as the video interviews we watched from “Leave” voters illustrated, this was not a rational economic decision, emotions played a major role. Little effort was made to engage voters with a positive narrative about the EU, but that is genuinely difficult in the context of austerity and the failure to enhance the social dimension of the European project.

Chris Warhurst, Director of the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick and former Labour Party candidate in Scotland spoke about the disarray it raised for UK Universities trying to work out what it would mean for their students and research projects. He also pointed to the massive divide between the different worlds of those who had voted “Leave” and “Remain,” and what needed to be done to reconnect them.

Bea Cantillon, Professor of Social Policy at the University of Antwerp in Belgium, questioned why such a poor system of decision-making on such an important and complex issue had been used. It would be inconceivable in other European countries. A short discussion about the unique unwritten features of the British Constitution, the advisory role of referenda and the sovereignty of the House of Commons was followed with interventions from the floor.

Ewan McGaughey, Lecturer in Law from King’s College London argued that a second referendum and the separation of Scotland were unlikely.

Akos Rona-Tas, Professor at the University of California, San Diego, argued that there were some significant implications for Eastern Europe where right wing parties were becoming

increasingly well established in the democratic system.

Nancy DiTomaso, Distinguished Professor of Management and Global Business at Rutgers Business School, in response to comments about whether such votes represent expressions of democracy (including a comment in the session that perhaps there should be a referendum that included all of Europe), drew attention to a recent book by political scientists, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels [see this issue's interview with Larry Bartels]. They argue that there is no evidence over the last century across a number of countries for either a populist theory of democracy (that people vote for candidates that match their policy positions and represent "the will of the people"), or for retrospective voting (that voters assess the performance of current leaders and vote based on their approval or disapproval). Rather they argue people vote based on social identities and group attachments. In other words, there is no evidence of a rational voter in the sense of "informed and engaged citizens." Achen and Bartels also note that referenda are not a solution for the problems of democracy, because they primarily benefit wealthy elites, and when not, can be "distinctly counterproductive."

Patrick Le Gales, Dean of the Urban School at Sciences Po, provided an incisive account of the political turmoil that had surrounded European politics for a long time – according to him Brexit was not such a surprise.

Robert Boyer, economist at the Institut des Ameriques, Paris, was also not at all surprised by the result as he had predicted it all along. [See Boyer's analysis separately in this issue.]

An intensive discussion followed with a number of contributors from the US and Europe. The high turnout and lively debate inspired us to think about a fast and open process for organizing a Discussion Forum for *Socio-Economic Review*, where contributions will be published in the autumn.

Jacqueline O'Reilly: "The Brexit vote revealed deep, long-term fractures in support for international political and economic institutions. It marks a break with the status quo and provides a unique opportunity to examine the forces and theoretical accounts of institutional continuity and change on a grand scale. The irony of a vote to 'take back control' is likely to increase the UK's economic vulnerability. But if the sky doesn't fall in and the British economy manages to swerve out of an Armageddon prognosis, aided by a 'Weimaresque' abandon of providing cheap money through quantitative easing (QE) and reducing interest rates, the result will be bad for the rest of Europe. If the predictions are correct and the economy suffers, the results will also be bad both for the UK and European exporters. Ultimately there are likely to be few winners, other than the lawyers employed to re-write the new treaties to establish what exactly Brexit is going to mean."