What’s the problem with Brexit? Notes from the middle of Britain’s crisis

Article  (Accepted Version)


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/110211/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk
Gabriel Popham

Department of Social Anthropology, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, United Kingdom
g.popham@sussex.ac.uk
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3262-8228

Gabriel POPHAM is a doctoral student in social anthropology at the University of Sussex. He is a fellow in the Monetary Sovereignty research group at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, and his academic work focuses on grassroots political movements and the effects of EU governance from an ethnographic perspective.

Keywords: Brexit; ethnography; social anthropology; liminality; publics; democratic theory.

Abstract

The Brexit referendum was experienced as a dramatic moment of rupture by millions of people who voted to remain in the European Union. This article argues that the period of uncertainty that came after the referendum was also a highly generative period for new political projects. By following the fluid, dynamic and multi-faceted articulation of Brexit as an issue of public concern — that is, as an issue that represents many distinct problems for different groups of people — this article traces the difficulties faced by these groups, as they attempt to enact public interventions, and consequently to emerge as properly-speaking democratic publics. Drawing on ethnographic data gathered in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, this article makes the case for an embedded mode of social research that is attentive to the emergence, growth, and evolution of social and political movements, and that is, moreover, able to trace these dynamics over long periods of time.
Introduction

How did the Brexit referendum of June 2016 affect British politics and society? In what ways did the British political landscape change in the aftermath of the referendum? How could a single issue dominate the political agenda for years, and what have been the effects of this on the British public, particularly on that part of the public that was most opposed to it? Thousands and thousands of people became politically active following the referendum — many for the very first time in their lives — and came to form part of a broad emergent pro-European public in the UK. After the snap election of December 2019 finally confirmed the 2016 result, what happened to this political energy? Was it simply snuffed out of existence by the Conservatives’ landslide victory, or are there aspects of this mobilisation that have carried over and that might inform future political projects? Finally, in a context where people have supposedly had enough of experts and where critique seems to have well and truly run out of steam, what role can social research play?

Questions of this kind have animated countless debates over the last four years in the UK, and there are no simple answers to any of them. In this article, these questions will be taken as windows into many of the issues that were raised following the referendum, and that have become objects of ongoing concern for those opposed to Brexit. This article is based on a brief ethnographic research project carried out between late 2016 and late 2017, and sets the data gathered during that project against the backdrop of the longer Brexit crisis that lasted until the end of 2019, a period that was marked by prolonged mobilisation against Brexit in multiple arenas. The questions outlined above are not properly speaking ‘research questions,’ but rather questions that were meaningful from within ‘the field’ itself, and that served to focus the attention of many groups within the anti-Brexit political landscape, directing their discussions towards issues that were seen as particularly problematic. These questions are taken as signposts in this article for certain ethnographic “locations” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) that are firmly placed in the middle of Brexit, understood as a crisis and as a process of transition. In this sense, these questions are worth following because of how they frame the many different problems with Brexit.

In trying to follow these questions ‘into the field’ rather than provide definitive answers to them, the approach taken in this article is one that tries to “rely more on the observations of
a studied apprentice than on the authoritative voice of judgment” (Pandian 2019, 9). The orientation to this field of research can perhaps be best described as a kind of lateral anthropology where the intention is to move alongside the work that happens among social actors in the field, who are considered as “fellow travellers along the routes of social abstraction and analysis” (Maurer 2005, xv). Drawing on the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey (1927, 1946), and on its more recent application in social scientific research (see, for example, Muniesa 2012), Brexit is understood in this article as a relational, active process, and as something that becomes a public issue because of the work done by political actors to make it so. What is the problem with Brexit? How is Brexit framed and understood, and by whom? How does a certain articulation of Brexit as a problem inform the actions taken by situated publics and other political groups? More specifically, how did different articulations of Brexit enable or hinder public involvement in the Brexit process? What, ultimately, did this public involvement in Brexit look like?

The article will move chronologically throughout the course of the Brexit crisis between 2016 and 2019. The first section will present the methods employed for this research project and will outline some of the methodological implications of conducting social research from an embedded ethnographic position. The second section will begin with an ethnographic vignette from early 2017, and will seek to conceptualise the post-referendum period not only as a moment of transition, but as a transition that was uniquely generative of new political forms, what anthropologists might call a liminal period during which embodied experiences of the crisis were intimately tied to the question of political organisation, and to a recognition of the historic significance of the Brexit crisis. The third section will build on the findings of the research and will trace how a certain interpretation of the problem with Brexit became articulated as an issue for public involvement under the banner of People’s Vote, the campaign that most forcefully pushed for a second referendum from early 2018 until the end of 2019. This section will also raise a broader theoretical question about the emergence of publics in such periods of crisis. The conclusion will summarise the main argument and the findings of the research project and will point towards certain directions for further research on the emergence of democratic publics in periods of crisis such as the UK’s fraught exit from the EU.

Methodology
The research on which this article is based was focused primarily around three months of embedded ethnographic research conducted in early 2017, which was complemented by a
longer period of online data collection and analysis, lasting from late 2016 until late 2017. The central part of the research was made up of participant observation conducted in London within pro-Remain, anti-Brexit or otherwise pro-European settings such as demonstrations, talks, and political meetings. What was remarkable from the outset was the significant degree of politicisation that took place after the referendum, and in which large numbers of people became politically active by opposing Brexit within the then-nascent anti-Brexit movement.

This ethnographic participant observation included three distinct methodologies. First, in order to gain a closer perspective on the actual organisational work that animated some of these emergent pro-Remain discussions, I chose to embed myself within one group in particular – the UK wing of DiEM25 (Democracy in Europe Movement 2025), a pan-European political movement that established itself in the UK in January 2017. This decision allowed me to take on a more explicitly participatory role throughout the course of my research, self-consciously adopting more of an ‘insider’ position in this setting. For Alexandra Plows, taking an insider position comes with certain pros and cons: on the one hand, “the identification of shared narratives, experiences, histories […] means that a rapport between researcher and researched is easily established” (Plows 2008, 1530). This is especially important in ethnographic settings where ‘gatekeeping’ occurs, which applies in many cases to social movement activities. However, insider ethnography can also lead to implicit bias: as Plows writes, “concerns about not seeing the wood for the trees [and] overly sympathetic accounts that are not rigorous enough” (1531) are among the main risks that come with taking an insider position in ethnographic research.

The second methodology used in this research was a less involved practice of ethnographic observation that was intended to complement the close participant observation mentioned above. The primary aim in this case was to track the adoption and communication of anti-Brexit and/or pro-EU signifiers, and follow their proliferation, both online and offline. The site-specific ‘insider’ ethnography described above lasted for a total of three months in early 2017, whereas this looser practice of observation continued for the best part of a year, from late 2016 until the completion of the research project in late 2017. While this research is not strictly-speaking a multi-sited ethnography, it does draw on an orientation to research that “moves out from single sites and local situations […] to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus 1995, 96). A more appropriate variation is perhaps what Gregory Feldman calls “nonlocal ethnography” (2011, 375), where the attention is focused on how “social relations between disconnected actors” are created by “abstract, mediating agents” such as technologies of communication, political decisions, legal
frameworks, social norms and so on (378). The emergence of public responses to a diffuse crisis such as Brexit cannot be pinned down to any one site, or to any one group of people; as we will see below, a public must be made up to a certain degree by strangers in order to really have public relevance (cf. Warner 2002). In this regard, Feldman’s nonlocal methodology becomes especially useful in order to ethnographically account for the elements that can create commonality out of strangerhood.

In addition to these two modes of ethnographic participant observation, the third part of the methodology was based on ten qualitative semi-structured interviews that were conducted in early 2017, in order to bring in nuanced, in-depth, and personal accounts from participants in these political movements. Eight of these interviews were with members of the UK wing of DiEM25, and two other interviews were with people outside of this network, who were members of analogous anti-Brexit groups. In all cases, I made sure that interviewees were not only fully aware of my aims and intentions as a researcher, but that there was also a significant degree of rapport and underlying trust between us, which was built up over months of interaction and collaboration. These interviews provided deeply textured and diverse understandings of what was going on in British politics at the time, and were used both as primary data for a Master’s thesis (Popham 2017), and as additional points of reference in the course of the research process, following what O’Reilly calls “sequential analysis” (2012, 182), namely the practice of analysing ethnographic data during the period of data collection.

In interviews and in public demonstrations, there was a clear trend in the kinds of affective responses that had been elicited by the result of the Brexit referendum. These ranged from dismay to outright rage and distress, in some cases even grief for a European future that, as activists argued, had been taken away from them and from the rest of the country. While this was not a single homogeneous world view, these affective, highly charged responses – both individual and collective – were “constituted by a particular unity of distribution of meanings, sentiments, sensations and possibilities” (Gilbert 2013, 151), which pointed in the direction of an emergent politics that was still in the process of articulating its own distinctive political practices. Drawing on the data gathered throughout this period and complementing it with the unfolding of the Brexit transition up until 2019, two findings in particular stand out. The first concerns precisely the emergent quality of the anti-Brexit political landscape in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, which began finding its expression during a period characterised by ambiguity and instability, but also by an elusive promise for a different political horizon. The second finding is about the very significant fault lines between different factions of Remainers, which were already apparent in early 2017, and which eventually crystallised
around distinct and competing public interventions into the Brexit process. The differences that
criss-crossed these broad anti-Brexit or pro-European publics depended on whether the
problem with Brexit was seen as something that had been produced by the referendum and that
mainly affected the UK’s future relations with Europe, or whether Brexit was an event that had
revealed profound and pre-existing problems within British society, pointing towards a need
for broader intervention beyond the question of Britain’s exit from the EU. These two findings
will be explored in more detail in the next two sections, where we will move from a rather fluid
and open-ended political landscape in 2017 to one that eventually took on a more stable form
from 2018 onwards, with certain parts of the anti-Brexit movement gaining prominence whilst
others struggled to achieve similar levels of public involvement.

Crisis and transition

“Something’s changing,” suggests the headline of an article on the news website openDemocracy
about the British launch of DiEM25 in January 2017 (Sakalis 2017). DiEM25 is a Europe-wide
transnational political movement, a hybrid between a social movement and a
political party that was founded in 2016, on the basis of an internationalist and left-wing
critique to the neoliberal politics of the EU: “in the EU, against this EU,” as its slogan ran
during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign, when it was part of the left-wing Another Europe
is Possible campaign. Despite the failure to win the referendum in June 2016, “the atmosphere
in the room” described by Alex Sakalis “was one of optimism and enthusiasm” (2017). Held
in the handsome, wood-panelled theatre space of Conway Hall, in London’s university quarter
Bloomsbury, this was one of many such Remainer meetings held in London in that period that
tackled the complicated social and political situation that had been produced by the Brexit
referendum. For many of the people present that day, this meeting was a very formative catalyst
for future political actions; an event that offered a highly resonant snapshot of what a possible
grassroots intervention into the Brexit process might look like.

As far as meetings of this kind go, the Conway Hall meeting was notable in how it
managed to galvanise a group of complete strangers into seeing themselves as sharing some
affinity, and immediately succeeded in channelling that affinity towards the practical task of
building a democratic public. In this case, the affinity was a general dissatisfaction with the
state of British democracy, a concern to reaffirm a sense of Europeanness in the face of the
government’s plans for Brexit, and a desire to oppose the rising tide of populism in Europe and
in the US. The meeting, which formally established the first group of volunteers to animate
DiEM25 in the UK, was seen by participants as a truly galvanising and electric moment because
it succeeded in turning the abject failure that had been Brexit (followed shortly after by Trump’s election) into a moment of possibility. In early 2017 there were many meetings that succeeded in producing this kind of effect, tremendously affective encounters that framed a certain understanding of the problem with Brexit, and that articulated what kind of public intervention could be enacted to address it. Despite the differences in political focus, these meetings all sought to present the current predicament of the UK as the result of a conjuncture of certain political, social and cultural forces (cf. Gilbert 2019): the rise of populism, the effects of neoliberalism, the legacies of Britain’s post-industrial and post-imperial past, or the internal contradictions of the European Union were all ingredients that served to problematise Brexit Britain, and out of which alternative political projects could be built.

The period of crisis and transition that followed the Brexit referendum was a highly uncertain time for the UK, a long stretch of political turbulence over which, four years later, there is still little in the way of consensus, never mind reconciliation. However, for some people this period of transition was also highly generative: moments such as the Conway Hall meeting described above are an example of the kind of “framing work” through which people were collectively able to articulate their grievances into “broader and more resonant claims” (Tarrow, 2011, 31), turning the Brexit referendum into a “political opportunity” that could encourage people to participate in anti-Brexit politics (32). Borrowing a classic concept from social anthropology, we can understand the period of transition following the Brexit referendum as a liminal period, as a moment of ambiguity and instability in which the UK was caught “betwixt and between” its European past and a future that was still unknown (Turner 1967, 93). In developing this idea of liminality, Victor Turner identified the deep transformative potential that is present during in-between periods, during moments when one is “neither this nor that, and yet is both” (99). Although Turner’s focus was mainly directed at heavily formalised rites of initiation and other explicit rituals, he also opened the door to a much wider application of the concept, and sought to present this idea of liminality as something that is relevant to understanding what it means for change to occur in society in more general terms. For Turner, there is a basic process at work in periods of transition that applies equally well to rituals and rites, as it does to social situations of a different order altogether (see also Szakolczai and Thomassen 2019); an initial moment of rupture is followed by an in-between period, a so-called liminal period where the subject is marked by “profound ambiguity” (Turner 1967, 95), and which eventually gives way to a closure of sorts, a moment of aggregation in which the subject returns to a stable state.

As Bjørn Thomassen writes,
“Turner realized that ‘liminality’ served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience” (2009, 14).

We can see something similar at work in the Brexit process: the initial and very sharp moment of rupture that happened in June 2016 was followed by an extended period of transition, what we may think of as a liminal period in which the final outcome of Brexit was far from clear, all the way up until the moment, in December 2019, when the Conservatives led by Boris Johnson won the general election by a landslide, promising to “Get Brexit Done” by the end of 2020, as their slogan went (cf. Perrigo 2019). In 2017, with the referendum still fresh in everyone’s minds, the way in which Brexit was tied to individual experience was particularly acute, and it seemed as if everyone on the Remain side had their own story of how their perception of the country had changed after the referendum. As a result of this intense feeling of rupture, countless new political networks, both online and offline, began to emerge, often helped along by events such as the Conway Hall meeting. Many of the anti-Brexit groups that were formed in this period shared some fundamental perspectives on the UK. In particular, they all placed significant emphasis on the UK’s transnational dimension, and their criticism of the Brexit project was in many cases grounded in a sharp awareness that the British national space leaks out as a European, cosmopolitan space, regardless of whether this cosmopolitanism is defined in terms of the free movement of people or of goods, or in terms of shared historical legacies, such as World War II or Britain’s initial entry into the European Community in 1973.

However, while many of these groups developed similar modes of public discourse, articulating their grievances through articles, tweets, social media posts, open letters, petitions, and even billboards,1 the significant differences often lay in how they understood the problem with Brexit. They disagreed not only about whether the problem had to do with Brexit itself or with something that pre-existed the referendum, but also about whether the problem was primarily one that affected the UK at the local, national, or international level of scale. For instance, the position taken up by left-wing groups such as DiEM25 UK was that Brexit was a symptom of a long-standing problem that could be traced back to de-industrialisation and the erosion of local economies, particularly in the North of England. This, combined with a dysfunctional democracy characterised by the first-past-the-post electoral system and an uneven devolution of power made for a situation that seemingly rejected any form of compromise or coalition-building, leading to what could almost be seen as an inevitable
rupture. The problem with Brexit here is firmly located within the UK’s own borders and has a history that stretches back to the 1980s; Brexit is perceived as evidence of a larger problem of social cohesion. By contrast, the People’s Vote campaign for a second referendum, as we will see in the next section, saw the problem with Brexit as something that began on June 23, 2016, as a problem that affected primarily the UK and its citizens’ external relations with the world. These different appreciations of the level of scale at which Brexit created a problem are important because the interventions that were produced were often difficult to reconcile with one another.2

Throughout this period, politicians, journalists, academics and activists provided a rolling commentary of what they thought was really at stake in the Brexit negotiations, and the different ways in which Brexit was a defining moment in the history of the UK. Without going into any detail here about the countless different positions around Brexit that have been articulated since 2016, it is relevant to note that perhaps the only element of consensus within a multi-layered anti-Brexit movement which encapsulated so many different interpretations and political projects was the acknowledgment that the referendum was indeed a watershed moment for the UK and quite possibly for the rest of Europe as well. This was something that many of the people I spoke with during interviews and throughout the course of my participant observation had made clear to me: when it came to Brexit there was a before and an after, and for many it was the referendum itself — the fact that it was so unexpected, that there was next to no plan for what should happen next, that there was such a distinctive geographic and demographic split across the country — that had enabled certain political expressions to emerge. During this initial period of emergence, the state of anti-Brexit politics was extremely fluid and changeable, partly as a result of other unexpected political developments,3 but over time, these early political expressions began to gain a more stable form, as we shall see in the next section. As Thomassen argues: “if historical periods can be considered liminal, it follows that the crystallization of ideas and practices that take place during this period must be given special attention” (2009, 20), because they may give some indication as to how certain norms, discourses, ideas, and practices may become fixed, while they may have previously been more fluid. We now turn to the question of how a substantial pro-European public came into being, one of the major outcomes of the liminal period of the Brexit crisis.

**Emergent publics**
The Brexit referendum undoubtedly came as a shock for many Remain supporters: after over forty years of mostly uneventful membership, a highly polarising referendum campaign had
produced the smallest of majorities in favour of leaving the EU, and the consequences, whilst unknown, were widely predicted among Remainiers to be disastrous. Somewhat unexpectedly, perhaps, the Brexit referendum also triggered an unprecedented level of interest in the question of European citizenship and Britain’s place in the EU. Indeed, far from settling the issue once and for all, the referendum contributed to the emergence of a significant new pro-European public, and in particular, of a public that was staunchly aligned against any form of Brexit whatsoever.

In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, between June 2016 and early 2017, the broad contours of this emergent public were already visible, for instance in the widely-shared blog posts of public commentators, such as philosopher A. C. Grayling — one of the early advocates for holding a second referendum — as well as in columns published in The New European, The Guardian, and many other publications, not to mention the demonstrations in London against Brexit, the first of many such marches to take place in those years. On one particular occasion in March 2017, around a hundred thousand people marched towards Parliament Square, carrying blue irises and yellow daffodils, EU flags waving overhead, and chanting Beethoven’s Ode to Joy, the EU’s official anthem. The date for the march was set for the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, which in 1957 established the European Economic Community. This date also happened to be just a few days before Prime Minister Theresa May was set to formally begin the Brexit negotiations by triggering Article 50 of the European Constitution, an event that was universally opposed by anti-Brexit campaigners. During demonstrations such as these and in other activist settings, the EU flag and other signifiers of support for the EU became ubiquitous, a means for anti-Brexit supporters to come together “as a community united by common symbols, anxieties and aspirations,” which allowed them to build “new affective attachments and commitments to each other and to their shared beliefs” (Mintchev and Moore 2019, 460). By signalling their common adherence to the European project and to its symbols, anti-Brexit campaigners also found ways of expressing to each other that they were on the same side, and that they belonged to the same nascent pro-European public. In this ardently anti-Brexit camp, many took the same position as Grayling and other public figures and contested the referendum itself, arguing not only that it was merely advisory and therefore non-binding, but also that the result ought to be considered void because of the allegedly fraudulent campaigning practices employed by the two Leave campaigns, Vote Leave and Leave.EU (cf. Cadwalladr 2017).

As mentioned previously, in early 2017, this public was still very much in flux and was more like an open-ended assemblage of many different political projects and aspirations that
responded directly to the shock of the referendum. For example, one of my interviewees at the time, who had helped organise a nationwide day of action in support of migrants in February 2017, reflected over the phone on how the campaign started rather unexpectedly from a Facebook post that he had published a few months after the referendum:

“If I had put out a proposal like that – or if anybody had put out a proposal like that in 2015, it probably would have just died a peaceful death on Facebook, and would have never come off it. Given that particular context it just struck a nerve” (as quoted in Popham 2017, 49).

According to him, the prevalent feeling among his Remain-supporting network at the time was characterised by “alarm and despair” at the implications of the Brexit referendum (49), a feeling that enabled the social media post to attract enough attention that the idea was able to get off the ground and turn into a national grassroots campaign. By the end of 2017, however, the wider pro-European movement had begun to take on a more settled form, as did the anti-Brexit discourse. The Twitter tag #FBPE5 had spread like wildfire all over anti-Brexit handles and across countless threads, making it very simple for Remainers to find one another online, form networks and affinity groups, and amplify each other’s anti-Brexit and pro-EU content. In April 2018, this broad, dynamic, and thoroughly self-organised movement became substantially more institutionalised under the banner of People’s Vote, a campaign launched by anti-Brexit MPs who lobbied for a second Brexit referendum. Crucially, the organisers of People’s Vote were able to secure funding for several pro-EU grassroots organisations to set up offices in the prestigious Millbank Tower in Central London (cf. Forrester 2018), offering even further material support (and social capital) to this growing anti-Brexit public.

The emergence of People’s Vote as the dominant voice in the anti-Brexit debate is a revealing case study for understanding how it is that publics come into existence in democratic societies. Among many political theorists and social scientists who have turned their attention to this question, Dewey offers a fruitful starting point, raising the question of how an “inchoate and amorphous estate [can] be organized into effective political action relevant to present social needs and opportunities” ([1927] 1946, 125). Rather than start from the assumption that the public automatically exists in democratic societies, Dewey focuses on the fact that it is all too often eclipsed, and that indeed its greatest challenge lies in achieving “such recognition of itself as will give it weight in the selection of official representatives” (77). This for Dewey is a fundamental challenge at the heart of the democratic state, and yet it is a view that runs directly against how the public is commonly represented. For instance, opinion polls (frequently used throughout the Brexit debate as evidence of support for one or another solution to Brexit)
produce a very specific definition of what the public is. As Bourdieu writes, this idea of the public does not really represent a collective opinion or deliberation; on the contrary, it is little more than a “pure statistical aggregation of individual opinions individually produced and expressed” (as quoted in Cody 2011, 44). For Francis Cody, writing in a review of the growing body of research in this field, there is very little that is self-evident about publics: dominant “representations of ‘the public’” that claim the existence of a single public capable of collective pronouncements on any issue “rest on the erasure of social structures, allowing universalizing claims to be articulated only by particular types of people” (2011, 38).

Dewey argues that the public comes into being as a result of “the perception of consequences which are projected in important ways beyond the persons and associations directly concerned in them” ([1927] 1946, 39). In other words, the political organisation of the public as such depends on the recognition that certain events in society have consequences which involve a large number of people, in both direct and indirect ways. A public in this view can only emerge as a result of “conjoint behavior” among strangers, among people who have been “indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil [and who] form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name” (35). The members of a public bear no relation to each other apart from a common recognition of the “extensive and enduring indirect consequences of acts” that affect them (47). The crucial factor determining the emergence of publics, then, is that publics only recognize themselves as such when they come into being as a result of collective action — what Dewey refers to as ‘conjoint behaviour’ — among previously unrelated strangers. Seeking to account for the crucial role of mass-mediated communication in the emergence of publics, Cody echoes Dewey when she writes that “the very capacity of publics to know themselves and act in the world is premised […] on recursive processes of mass mediation and self-abstraction” (2011, 47). Indeed, part of the anti-Brexit movement’s remarkable success in establishing itself as a public under People’s Vote depended on its ability to use social media effectively to create a sense of commonality out of strangerhood, through the reflexive circulation of pro-European or anti-Brexit signifiers such as the EU flag or the #FBPE tag, among others.

However, while this anti-Brexit public has certainly gained a significant identity through the circulation of texts (including social media posts, tweets, articles, infographics, podcasts and other forms of discourse), it would be incorrect to reduce the public, as Warner does in an influential essay, to something that “comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (2002, 55; emphasis added). Indeed, while many of the public perceptions of Brexit may have been highlighted and framed through news media and social media, as we saw
in the previous section, much of what made Brexit such a resonant issue had to do with the fact that people were able to tie their own experiences into this national moment of crisis. In the same way that the public should not be understood as something that is only created through discourse, Brexit as a public issue should be seen not just in discursive terms, but also as something that is constituted by many different kinds of material and social relations. Indeed, on multiple occasions in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey ([1927] 1946) insists on the essential and challenging role played by the process of active political organisation both in identifying a problem in society and also in articulating it in such a way as to enable some level of public involvement. In the end, People’s Vote was unable to achieve its goal of a second referendum on Brexit, and – bogged down by conflicting political ambitions within its leadership – suffered a rapid decline in the run-up to the 2019 election (cf. Mance 2020). In a broader sense, the Conservatives’ landslide victory in December of that year marked the sudden end of the anti-Brexit movement as a whole, bringing a long and stretched-out period of liminality to a close. In the next section, we conclude this article with a further methodological discussion on the potential for embedded and engaged ethnographic research to shed light on the long-term evolution of publics within periods of transition such as the Brexit crisis.

**Conclusion**

As was argued in the second section, periods of political uncertainty such as the Brexit crisis between 2016 and 2019 can be understood as liminal periods, as periods that are marked by a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty, and hence also by a certain openness to change. Far from witnessing a disintegration of possibilities for action, what many Remain supporters saw in the liminal period that followed the Brexit referendum were new horizons for public intervention that may have not been perceptible before, and upon which political projects could be articulated. To quote Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, the aftermath of the Brexit referendum presented something akin to a “speculative middle” (2018, 206), that is, a conceptual location where the question of “‘what if’ emerges as a catalyst” (206). In the third section, this argument was developed further, and we saw how a number of these rather fluid social formations crystallised under the guise of a specific and well-defined public, the People’s Vote campaign for a second referendum. Reading the emergence of People’s Vote against Dewey’s democratic theory of public-formation, we saw how the creation of such publics is very much a contingent phenomenon that depends on what Dewey calls the conjoint action of strangers who come to perceive themselves as a public with a stake in society. Far from being a settled entity whose will can be known – be it through opinion polls or referenda – a public
might best be understood as an ever-changing formation that gains more or less settled forms in situated circumstances, responding to specific understandings of a political problem in society. As a contingent social formation that evolves over time, this ‘life cycle’ of a public ultimately presents itself as a very compelling site for sustained, embedded, and engaged ethnographic research, in dialogue and perhaps even in active participation with publics that are present ‘in the field.’ In conclusion to this article, we return to some of the methodological issues initially raised in the first section.

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing recognition among anthropologists and ethnographers that how one constructs and inhabits a field of research has a crucial role in determining the kind of research that gets done. For Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, one of ethnography’s strong suits is precisely its well-developed sense of location, of “being set-here-and-not-elsewhere” (1997, 35). In addition to providing some meaningful context and situatedness to the research itself, Gupta and Ferguson argue that location should also be seen “as an ongoing project [...] something one strategically works at,” (37) in dialogue with one’s research participants in the field. More recent work in this direction has also looked at the contingent, partial, and, quite frankly, messy ways in which knowledge is constructed within certain locations, seeking to account for this messiness as a constitutive aspect of the research. As Plows writes, “we [as ethnographers] need to engage more honestly with the process of research,” because we “encounter, engage with and indeed co-create, complex dynamics and complex situations which shift and blur” (2018, xi-xii). Where there is participation there is engagement, and while this is never straightforward, it is rarely a pointless exercise. Within grassroots political projects, this acknowledgment of the value of collaboration and engagement is an important insight that is often taken as self-evidently true: for many of the people I interviewed and spoke with throughout the duration of my own research and beyond, some of the most resonant experiences came during such moments of encounter and co-creation, as I first saw in Conway Hall, but also had the privilege of witnessing many times again in multiple collaborative attempts to bring forth a democratic public. These are typically uneven, situational, and contingent encounters, and yet it is through encounters of this kind that ideas are articulated, and collaborative projects are born. These highly generative moments, in other words, leave a lasting impression on those who take part in them, including – now and again – the odd ethnographer or social researcher. But aside from the intrinsic relational value of such encounters, these moments also provide important windows onto shared and recursive processes of co-involvement that take place, often over significant periods of time, amongst otherwise unrelated strangers. For ethnography – and for qualitative social research more
broadly – actively taking part in these emergent forms of political work may provide valuable new avenues of inquiry. In particular, taking an embedded approach of this kind may encourage us to consider a wider range of documents as valid and fruitful ethnographic material. Minutes from meetings, drafts, comments and recurring discussions over a period of months and even years may provide the core elements for valuable research on the evolution of publics, producing longitudinal studies that may show how publics come into being, how they articulate an issue for public involvement, how they mature over time, and perhaps even how they decline in relation to political and societal problems. Ultimately, the research on which this article is based was able to address only a small chapter in the life cycle of the anti-Brexit movement, mainly because of the limited timeframe of the research project itself.

Incorporating a more consistent degree of embeddedness within such a research agenda would mean tracing the evolution of a public over a much longer period of time. This is a task that requires a kind of engagement that is sustained and that may require a more constant degree of participation in the work of the public in question, where the practice of ethnographic research would be more directly grounded in the experience of this social field. According to Anand Pandian, this is a central feature of anthropology, which seeks “to put experience into motion as both means and end of investigation: to work through experience of a field of inquiry and work on the experience of those we share that inquiry with” (2019, 49; emphasis in original). Effectively, gaining first-hand insight on “digital-age organisational forms” and “emergent political norms” (Juris 2008, 201) of a public or a social movement is something that requires not only direct involvement but a degree of commitment as well. As Jeffrey S. Juris writes in his ethnography of social movements against corporate globalisation around the turn of the century, being directly involved in the daily political work of other actors in the field raises its own host of complicated ethical questions, such as: “[w]hat is the relationship between ethnography and political action? How can we make our work relevant to those (with whom) we study?” (19). For Juris, the answer is a practice of ethnographic research which he calls “Militant Ethnography” (19), a practice that heavily reflects the direct-action tactics of his participants and collaborators in the field.

Other political contexts may lead to different kinds of decisions over positionality, but in any case, the foregrounding of experience that Pandian places at the heart of anthropological research can provide fruitful avenues of engagement for social researchers. For instance, with the substantial aid of cloud technologies and near-universal internet access, collaborative research is in fact becoming increasingly widespread among many contemporary social and political movements in the West, and it is a practice that is also remarkably mundane. Mapping
the political landscape in which grassroots groups find themselves is just one of the many things that these groups do as they seek to articulate a public intervention. In this, social researchers have many opportunities to contribute methodological, conceptual and theoretical skills to the publics in question. Ultimately, the encounters that may be opened up within such engagements go far beyond the limits of our institutional and disciplinary settings, enabling us, as researchers, to become ourselves participants and co-creators of social — and indeed public — knowledge.

References


Forrester, Kate. 2018. “Exclusive: People's Vote Campaign Raises £100k in a Week for Huge Anti-Brexit March.” Huffington Post. May 9th. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/peoples-vote-campaign-raises-ps100k-in-a-week-for-huge-anti-brexit-march_uk_5af1eaa3e4b0c4f19327aa31


---

1 See for example the anti-Brexit billboards put up by the grassroots group Led By Donkeys (Stewart, Sadri and Knowles 2019).

2 The works of anthropologists Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005) and Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016), amongst others, provide key conceptual elements to understand how “scale is not just a neutral frame for viewing the world [but] must be brought into being […] claimed and contested in cultural and political projects” (Tsing 2005, 58).

3 Gina Miller’s court case in January 2017, in which judges ruled that the UK government must seek the approval of Parliament before initiating the Brexit process, and the Labour Party’s unexpectedly strong performance under the leadership of socialist Jeremy Corbyn at the snap election of April 2017, stand out as two particularly significant political events of that year.

4 The 2006 Eurobarometer survey on EU attitudes in the UK gives a good idea of how dramatically attitudes towards the EU have changed over the course of a decade: at the time, interest in the EU was apparently extremely limited, with 85% of respondents reporting that they either knew very little about the EU, or nothing at all (EC 2006).

5 #FBPE stands for #FollowBackProEuropean, and was a popular tag used by anti-Brexit social media users on Twitter to grow each other’s following and increase the visibility of their tweets on the platform.