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NO EXIT FROM BREXIT?

Simon Susen

Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to examine the concept of Brexit. To this end, the analysis is structured as follows. The first part provides a shorthand *definition* of the concept of Brexit. The second part reflects on the historical *context* in which, on 23 June 2016, the UK referendum on European Union (EU) membership took place and which, arguably, had a profound impact on its outcome. The third part sheds light on the various sociological *implications* of the result of this referendum, paying specific attention to the principal reasons that led to the triumph of the Leave campaign over the Remain campaign. The fourth part offers some critical reflections on the *legitimacy* – or, as some may argue, illegitimacy – of the referendum's outcome. The fifth part makes some tentative remarks on the *prospects* of different Brexit scenarios – not only in relation to the UK, but also in relation to the EU in particular and the wider international community in general. Based on the preceding considerations, the chapter concludes by making a case for a 'critical sociology of Brexit'.

I. What Is Brexit?

In the most general sense, the term 'Brexit' refers to the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. It remains to be seen whether Brexit constitutes a potential or an actual, an abrupt or a gradual, a reversible or an irreversible process. Irrespective of the question of what the exact nature of Brexit turns out to be, however, there is a wide-reaching consensus – among both its advocates and its opponents – that its consequences are of major historical significance. Of course, one may scrutinize the numerous implications of Brexit on different levels, particularly the following: social, political, economic, cultural, institutional, ideological, scientific, demographic, military, geostrategic and environmental – to mention only the most obvious ones. Notwithstanding the question of what specific role these levels may, or may not, play in the unfolding of a Brexit scenario, it is the *confluence of multiple factors* that will determine what *life in the UK outside the EU*, as well as *life in the EU without the UK as a member state*, will look like.

Brexit has been pursued by numerous individual and collective actors – most radically by the UK Independence Party (UKIP), but also by Eurosceptics of other political parties, notably those of the Conservative Party. Ever since the UK joined the European

Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, and despite the fact that the continuation of the UK's membership of the EEC was agreed to by 67 per cent of voters in the 1975 referendum[1], the UK's relationship with 'continental Europe' has always been fraught with difficulties. From the beginning, the UK's EU membership has been characterized by high levels of Euroscepticism – among its citizens in general and its political elites in particular, especially among those situated on the right of the political spectrum. In essence, the UK's fiercest critics of the European project make the following argument: initially, the UK committed to joining a merely *economic* project. As EU countries grew closer and closer together, however, it found itself immersed in a *political* project, to which – according to most British Eurosceptics – the UK had not signed up when it decided to become a member of the EEC in 1973.

From a historical point of view, it is worth remembering that numerous treaties were signed (and called into force) that led to the consolidation of the EU: the Brussels Treaty (signed 1948, in force 1948); the Paris Treaty (signed 1951, in force 1952); the Modified Brussels Treaty (signed 1954, in force 1955); the Rome Treaty (signed 1957, in force 1958); the Merger Treaty (signed 1965, in force 1967); the European Council Conclusion (signed 1975); the Schengen Treaty (signed 1985, in force 1995); the Single European Act (signed 1986, in force 1987); the Maastricht Treaty (signed 1992, in force 1993); the Amsterdam Treaty (signed 1997, in force 1999); the Nice Treaty (signed 2001, in force 2003); and the Lisbon Treaty (signed 2007, in force 2009). This gradual movement towards 'an ever closer union' of the EU's member states constitutes a historical development of which Eurosceptics, not only in the UK but also in other European countries, tend to be highly suspicious.

Under Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, member states have the right to withdraw from the EU at any time. Yet, given that Article 50 has never been invoked in the past, the details of the UK's withdrawal process – if it goes ahead – are subject to a considerable degree of *uncertainty*. In principle, the time frame for withdrawing from the EU is two years from the date that a particular country wishing to leave – in this case, the UK
– gives formal and official notice of this intention, although an extension may be granted if the negotiations turn out to take longer than expected. Thus, the immediate question that poses itself in this context is as follows: presupposing that it actually intends to do so, *when* will the UK trigger Article 50? It is generally assumed that new agreements between the EU and the UK will be negotiated in this two-year period, although the divorce procedure may go ahead without any definite arrangements.

The Brexit vote appears to be a historical irony, considering that the UK applied to join the EEC twice (in 1963 and in 1967, respectively) and that, on both occasions, its applications were vetoed by Charles de Gaulle, the then-President of France. The main reason for this was that the UK was perceived as *largely incompatible* with continental Europe, not least due to the former's deep-seated hostility to any unifying project envisaged by the latter. After de Gaulle ceased to hold the French presidency, however, the UK's (third) application for membership was successful. When, on 1 January 1973, the UK joined the EEC, British scepticism towards the idea of a pan-European project had far from disappeared, indicating that it had become a member, above all, for economic – rather than for political – reasons. As both 'Bremainers' and 'Brexiteers' will concede, this *lack*

of enthusiasm for the political, let alone the cultural, dimensions underlying the European project can be regarded as one of the primary reasons for the outcome of the 2016 UK Referendum.

The linguistic creation 'Brexit' is, evidently, a portmanteau of the words 'Britain' and 'exit'. One may speculate whether or not further national exits from the EU – such as 'Grexit' (Greece), 'Bexit' (Belgium), 'Nexit' (Netherlands), 'Frexit' (France) or 'Dexit' (Germany) – will follow. These are only a few potential scenarios related to what many interpret as the increasing unpopularity of the EU in some of its key member states. The voting result of the 2016 UK Referendum was as follows: 51.89 per cent voted to leave and 48.11 per cent voted to remain. In other words, the outcome was remarkably close, adding to the uncertainty concerning the democratic mandate of the referendum result. It remains to be seen what both the short-term and the long-term consequences of the UK's withdrawal from the EU will be. There is no doubt, however, that Brexit – if it *is* implemented – will have a major impact on (a) the UK, (b) the EU and (c) the world. Those *favouring* Brexit tend to assume that, in the long term, the UK will be in a *stronger* position, regaining a robust sense of national sovereignty in relation to the EU in particular and the world in general. Those *rejecting* Brexit tend to believe that, in the long term, the UK will be in a *weaker* position, reduced to an increasingly marginalized player on the world stage, with a shrinking economy and significantly curtailed political influence on both regional and global decision-making processes – the irony being, of course, that all of this has been self-inflicted.

Arguably, the most controversial issue in this respect concerns the so-called 'Four Freedoms' of the European Union: (a) the free movement of *goods*; (b) the free movement of *services and freedom of establishment*; (c) the free movement of *persons* (and citizenship), including the free movement of workers; and (d) the free movement of *capital*. One thorny point of contention, on both sides of the argument, is the extent to which the UK – after having invoked Article 50 and, eventually, withdrawn from the EU – may, or may not, be able to continue to enjoy these freedoms. It is widely estimated that, on average, 45 per cent of the UK's exports go into the European Economic Area (EEA). Thus, notwithstanding the exact outcome of the negotiations between the UK and the EU, access to the latter's Single Market will be crucial to the former's future prosperity.

II. Historical Context

It is vital to examine the historical context in which, on 23 June 2016, the UK referendum on EU membership took place, since the constitution of the former had a profound impact on the outcome of the latter. From a historical perspective, the Brexit vote can be explained in terms of 'the conjunction of three phenomena: a *world problem*, a *European or EU problem* and a *British* (or, more properly, English and Welsh) *problem*'[2]. Let us, therefore, consider each of these problems.[3]

1.

The *world problem* is reflected in the prevalent disillusionment with and alienation from mainstream political parties, political leaders, political institutions and political systems.

Symptomatic of this widespread disaffection and frustration with, if not hostility towards, what many perceive as the 'business as usual' of conventional political actors and structures is the rise of populist agendas, especially of those associated with right-wing politics. Surely, new social movements – notably those whose participants pursue progressive aims and objectives – have expressed a profound sense of discontent with traditional social and political arrangements for several decades.[4] For these arrangements tend to contribute to reproducing and legitimizing mechanisms of domination, which, due to their disempowering implications for large parts of the population, leave little room for individual or collective forms of emancipation. Right-ring populism, however, is not driven by the ambition to replace representative models of democracy with deliberative or grass-roots modes of collective decision-making. Rather, it is motivated by the attempt to blame not only 'the system' – including the political, cultural and economic elites by which it is sustained – but also minority groups – such as immigrants – for social crises and dysfunctionalities.

There are numerous examples illustrating this recent trend: the rise of Donald Trump and his victory in the 2016 US presidential election; the prominent (and almost triumphant) role of the far-right (*FPÖ*[5]) candidate Norbert Hofer in the Austrian presidential election; the 'mainstreamization' of the Front National's leader Marine Le Pen in France; and, last but not least, the increasing influence of UKIP, previously led by Nigel Farage, in Great Britain. These are only some – rather obvious – examples of a wider sociopolitical transition towards the normalization of right-wing populism in 'the West'. Given that debates on immigration played a major role in the run-up to, as well as in the outcome of, the 2016 UK Referendum, it is hardly surprising that right-wing anti-immigration rhetoric shaped the agenda of political forces advocating Brexit to a significant, if not decisive, degree.

2.

The *European problem* is reflected in the prevalent disillusionment with and alienation from the structures, practices and actors of the EU. Certainly, this sense of dissatisfaction with the EU is more pronounced in some European countries than in others. As the most enthusiastic defenders of the EU are obliged to concede, however, it can be detected across the entire continent – that is, not only in *'weaker' countries*, which have been severely affected by the recent financial crisis, neoliberal austerity programmes and high rates of unemployment as well as, in the Mediterranean context, the migration crisis (especially Greece; in addition: Italy, Spain, Portugal and – in the North Atlantic – Ireland), but also in *'stronger' countries*, which, despite facing enormous endogenous and exogenous problems, continue to be *relatively* stable and prosperous (such as France) or may even have benefited from recent developments (such as Germany). Arguably, Euroscepticism, although being far from absent, is less pronounced in the 'newcomer' EU countries – such as Bulgaria (since 2007), Croatia (since 2013), Cyprus (since 2004), the Czech Republic (since 2004),
Estonia (since 2004), Hungary (since 2004), Latvia (since 2004), Malta (since 2004), Poland (since 2004), Romania (since 2007), Slovakia (since 2004) and Slovenia (since 2004). Within these 'newcomer' countries, the EU tends to be perceived as a *transnational*

project of opportunities – not least by those who have settled in the territories of other EU member states, but also by their citizens in general, who tend to believe that, at least in the long term, their country will be better off within a union of largely wealthy nations.

Yet, across Europe, this collective sense of optimism has considerably weakened in recent years, especially since the global financial crisis that peaked in 2008. One may argue about, and hold different opinions on, the main reasons for this fading of popularity of the EU on a large scale, but it appears that the following factors are particularly important:

(a) the EU's alleged incapacity to find an adequate response to, let alone to prevent, the *financial crisis of 2008*;
(b) the EU's alleged inability to deal with the recent *migration crisis*, combined with its general lack of success in controlling *migration flows*;
(c) the EU's alleged failure to combat, let alone to eliminate, *terrorism*;
(d) the EU's alleged tendency towards undemocratic, out-of-touch, self-referential and cumbersome bureaucratic *centralism*;
(e) the EU's alleged propensity towards undermining its member states' national *sovereignty* – above all, in political, judicial and territorial terms.

Extreme versions of this Eurosceptic view can be found not only in public opinion, shared by ordinary people 'from below', but also in populist statements, made by high-profile politicians 'from above'. Within the context of the UK referendum debate, Boris Johnson's explicit and provocative comparison of the EU's integration strategy of an 'ever closer union' with the expansionist politics of Napoleon and Adolf Hitler can be interpreted as an extreme attempt to qualify the EU's policies as authoritarian, dictatorial and ultimately undemocratic. To be sure, social-scientific analysts may hold different views on whether Euroscepticism was generated 'from below' (by ordinary European citizens) and then taken up and reinforced 'from above' (by European politicians), or whether it occurred the other way around. There is no doubt, however, that, over the past decades, a toxic ideological climate has developed in various sectors of European society – that is, a climate that has made the EU increasingly unpopular, so unpopular that it has been going through a genuine *legitimacy crisis* on a grand scale.

3.

The *British* problem – which may be more accurately described as the English and Welsh problem – is reflected in the pervasive reluctance of UK citizens and politicians to conceive of their EU membership as a largely positive condition, as illustrated in their tendency to embrace a deeply ambivalent attitude towards the EU. The British state's role in the EU and British society's role in Europe have always been a matter of contention, as expressed in the relatively even balance of opinion in the run-up to the referendum campaign, culminating in the narrow victory of the Leave campaign. The obvious question that poses itself in the wake of the referendum result is what the UK's role in a post-Brexit European scenario will be. Two European countries existing within Europe but

outside the EU, namely Norway and Switzerland, are often mentioned in this context. Both of them are part of the Schengen Area and, effectively, part of the EEA: Norway is a member of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and Switzerland has numerous bilateral agreements with the EU. The UK's withdrawal from the EU will present uncharted territory, in the sense that Brexit – once Article 50 has been invoked and all negotiations that form part of the divorce procedure have been completed – will involve a large-scale disentanglement from the deep structural ties it has built with, within and through the EU ever since it became a member.

Arguably, the most likely scenario – although, at this stage, it is far from certain – is that the UK will choose to go down the EEA path, in order for it to retain its vital access to the European market. Even if it does not formally join the EEA, however, its official representatives – who, along with their EU counterparts, will be sitting at the Brexit negotiating table – will do everything they can to ensure that the UK preserves its access to the European market. This almost certainly means that, in one way or another, the UK will have to accept the rules of the game underlying the aforementioned 'Four Freedoms' of the EU. The irony of such a post-Brexit scenario, of course, lies in the fact that it illustrates that many of those who voted for the UK to leave the EU were systematically *misled* when making them believe that, in the Promised Land of a 'truly' independent UK, they could realistically expect a substantial fall in EU immigration. Eventually, the UK will have to choose from a range of relatively uncomfortable options, before being confronted with deeply painful and ultimately negative, albeit not necessarily catastrophic, outcomes. Most EU member states – in particular, France and Germany – will insist that, within the European market, there can be no free movement of *goods*, *services* and *capital* without the free movement of *persons* and *workers*. In other words, it is not even a matter of cherry picking: *either* 'you are in' *or* 'you are out', but you cannot have it both ways. Thus, once the UK is no longer a member of the EU and, within a post-Brexit framework, chooses to accept the free movement of *goods*, *services* and *capital* within the EEA (and does so either as a member or as a non-member of the EEA), it will almost certainly have to accept the free movement of *persons* and *workers* too.

Whatever the result of the Brexit negotiations turns out to be, the devil *will* lie in the detail and, undoubtedly, the detail *will* matter, since the ramifications are highly significant – not only for the UK itself, but also for other European countries and, indeed, for the world. The last thing that the member states of the EU – notably its most powerful players, such as Germany and France – wish to trigger is a domino effect, whereby Brexit would be succeeded by other national exits from the EU – such as 'Grexit' (Greece), 'Bexit' (Belgium), 'Nexit' (Netherlands), 'Frexit' (France) or 'Dexit' (Germany). At the moment, none of them may seem likely, but we must not forget that, a few years ago, not many people would have predicted a Brexit scenario. Time will tell what the numerous – potential and actual, short-term and long-term, minor and major – consequences of the Brexit-related opening of the Pandora's box will be. Surely, the societal effects will have different shapes and forms, while carrying different weight at different local, national, regional, continental and global levels. It seems inevitable, however, that other EU member states will not grant the UK 'special treatment', let alone endow it with a 'special position', given that its government called the referendum and its population voted to

leave. From the beginning of its EU membership, the UK has been perceived as, at best, a 'difficult customer' or, at worst, a 'trouble maker', most of whose citizens and representatives, from the point of view of other EU members, have been hard to please within the family of European nations. It is no surprise, then, that even an *à la carte* approach (no Schengen, no euro, in addition to the EU deal that the then-Prime Minister, David Cameron, struck in February 2016 in Brussels) was not enough to satisfy the majority of UK voters that remaining in the EU was the most sensible option for their country.

Another potential, but highly significant, domino effect of the 2016 UK Referendum is of *domestic* nature: the possible break-up of the UK, due to Scotland's and Northern Ireland's vote to remain within the EU (62 per cent and 55.8 per cent, respectively). In light of the outcome of the 2016 UK Referendum, Scotland is in a strong position to make a case for holding another referendum on independence, and calls for a reunified Ireland have also been on the agenda since the result has been announced (although the former is far more likely to occur than the latter). Even if a second referendum in Scotland turned out to back independence, it would be far from clear to what extent such a scenario would be a desirable, let alone a viable, option for Scotland for a number of reasons: the fall of the oil price; the question of the currency (the pound sterling versus the euro); the uncertainty about EU membership (given that France, Belgium and – most forcefully – Spain are unlikely to back a separatist movement's twofold ambition to gain independence and, once this goal has been achieved, to join the EU); the insecurity arising from the question about the details of Scotland's disentanglement from the UK, considering the former's deep social, political, cultural, economic, military and historical ties with the latter. In short, even if a second referendum on Scottish independence *were* to be held and even if, this time, Scotland's population voted *for* independence, it would be far from a done deal that this 'stateless nation'[5] would be in a sufficiently strong position to convince all EU member states that it should be allowed to join the club as an independent country. Furthermore, it remains to be seen what impact Brexit will have on the status and role of Northern Ireland – crucially, in terms of its border with the Republic of Ireland, which, if it came to Brexit, would effectively become the border between the UK and the EU. The reintroduction of border controls on the basis of strict police, if not military, surveillance systems and checkpoints seemed almost unimaginable *before* the referendum. *After* the referendum it represents a serious question that those in charge of putting Brexit into practice not only have to confront but also have to resolve. One may legitimately argue that the UK's non-inclusion in the Schengen Area and non-inclusion in the euro-zone should make its exit from the EU slightly more straightforward than the hypothetical exit pursued by any of the EU countries that have signed up to Schengen and/or are fully fledged members of the EU's monetary union.

Whatever a Brexit scenario will turn out to look like, however, it is unquestionable that – as even the most optimistic Brexiteers will have to concede – the implications and ramifications are mind-bogglingly complex: in the *best-case scenario*, it will involve the UK's cumbersome renegotiation of its relationship with the EU, for which it will be forced to pay a high price, not only economically but also symbolically; in the *worst-case scenario*, it will lead to the UK's break-up, which, long before the 2016 UK Referendum, had been so famously predicted by Tom Nairn, one of the most prominent Scottish

political theorists of nationalism.[6] If Cameron goes down in history as the British Prime Minister who may be regarded as directly or indirectly responsible not only for the UK's withdrawal from the EU but also for the UK's dissolution, this will be a legacy that, in terms of its far-reaching significance, will be hard to trump.

III. Sociological Implications

Let us confront the task of shedding some light on the various sociological *implications* of the result of the 2016 UK Referendum, paying particular attention to the principal reasons that led to the triumph of the Leave campaign over the Remain campaign. The key word that has been, and continues to be, mentioned by both experts and laypersons commenting on the result of the 2016 UK Referendum – and doing so from all sides of the political spectrum – is *divisions*. Hence, the obvious question that poses itself is what kind of divisions they have in mind.

What is striking in this respect is that especially those who are opposed to the outcome of the 2016 UK Referendum tend to stress that, in their judgement, the Brexit vote was, above all, a *protest vote* and, hence, primarily a vote *against* various issues, rather than a vote *for* a set of desired results. This interpretation is ironic insofar as Brexiteers commonly accused those in charge of the Remain campaign of relying on 'Project Fear' – that is, on a collective endeavour embedded in a political discourse based on scaremongering and incapable of making a positive case for UK's membership in the current, or in a reformed, EU. From the point of view of most Brexiteers, it was not their own project but the project of the Bremainers that was predominantly about making a case *against*, rather than a case *for*, a post-referendum scenario – namely, against social, political and economic uncertainty and decline. The Brexiteers, in the eyes of their supporters, succeeded in making a *positive* case for their desired goal, notably 'UK's independence'. This bold political objective was expressed in various catchphrases – such as 'Let's take back control!', 'We want our country back!', 'Put Britain first!' and 'This Thursday [23 June 2016] can be our country's Independence Day' – all of which, as cynics may point out, can be interpreted as socio-hermeneutic manifestations of the collective narcissism pervading crucial elements of the 2016 UK Referendum debate.

The outcome of the referendum suggests that the rhetoric of the Leave campaign was far more effective than that of the Remain campaign. In the opinion of a vast number of voters, the former came across as far more *positive* and *optimistic* than the latter. The Bremainers seemed to offer little more than a largely *passive* attitude, concerned with preserving the status quo in an uninspiring and pragmatic, if not technocratic, manner. The Brexiteers, by contrast, appeared to transmit – and, if successful, to be able to deliver on – a fundamentally *active* attitude, oriented towards the construction of a bright future in an inspirational and idealistic, if not utopian, fashion.

> The 'remain' campaign relied heavily on trying to scare people into voting for the status quo. Indeed, it was foolish of the Cameron government to allow the seemingly *passive* term 'remain' to define the potential future of the UK in Europe rather than asserting an *active* goal for building a better future. Hardly anyone in the 'remain' camp presented an idealistic argument for a European future (Gordon Brown made an attempt).[7]

It would be erroneous, however, to overlook, let alone to deny, the *negativity* permeating the Brexit campaign: caught up in a deep sense of national nostalgia, combined with a romanticizing celebration of a glorious past, implicitly connected to the worldwide influence of the British Empire, the Leave campaign lacked any concrete and thought-through proposals for an alternative future, informed by a clear, detailed and viable game plan.

> The vote was grounded in *nostalgia*. The Brexit campaign was *almost entirely negative* and *devoid of plans for an alternative future*. It played on an old idea of sovereignty, old English ideas about the difference between the island nation and the mainland of Europe, alarm over immigrants and claims that the UK was somehow subsidizing Europe.[8]

Another irony of Brexit, then, consists in the following paradox:

- On the one hand, the Remain campaign – in the eyes of many voters – lacked electoral appeal because it *appeared* largely *negative*, *pessimistic* and *passive*, whereas the Leave campaign – in the eyes of many voters – possessed electoral appeal because it *appeared* largely *positive*, *optimistic* and *(pro-)active*.
- On the other hand, the Remain campaign sought to stick to a *pragmatic* and *realistic* strategy, referring to the 'hard' European reality of which the UK was already part and obeying, with some exceptions due to EU concessions, the rules of the game with which it was already familiar, whereas the Leave campaign endorsed an *obscure* and *unrealistic* vision, lacking a coherent and feasible outline of what British life outside the UK would look like and, more importantly, how exactly it would be organized.

The paradox described above is symptomatic of another significant problem attached to the 2016 UK Referendum: voters were confronted with a *binary choice* (Remain versus Leave), but could vote either way for *very different* – and, on several levels, diametrically opposed – reasons:

- For those on the *radical left*, the EU is essentially a *market-driven* project of transnational capitalism, in which, under the hegemonic influence of Germany and France, the pursuit of financial profit and the free movement of capital can be guaranteed and, in fact, maximized. Most defenders of this position, however, tend to be willing to accept the historic achievements of the EU – such as its commitment to the progressive ideals of the Enlightenment as well as its contributions to securing peace and cooperation between European political powers.
- For those on the *radical right*, the EU is essentially a *pan-European* project, that is, an expression of the historic attempt to build a United Europe, which, under the hegemonic influence of Germany and France, is oriented towards the construction of a 'European Federation', a 'Federal Europe', a 'Federal Republic of Europe', a 'United States of Europe' or a 'European state or superstate' – that is, a Europe in which national sovereignty ceases to exist.
- For those on the *centre-left*, the EU is essentially a *civilizational* project shaped by Enlightenment ideals – 'such as progress, tolerance, liberty, equality, solidarity, dignity, sovereignty, and autonomy'[9] – and, ultimately, a political endeavour capable of

providing a cosmopolitan framework in which 'social processes of liberation, self-determination, and unification'[10] predominate, peace and prosperity are guaranteed, pluralism and multiculturalism are celebrated, while transnational cooperation and deliberation preponderate.

- For those on the *centre-right*, the EU is essentially a *pragmatic* project, permitting European nation states to reach an unprecedented degree of social, political and economic stability, not only by protecting but also by fostering the free movement of (a) goods, (b) services, (c) persons/workers and (d) capital – all of which, by virtue of the 'invisible hand' of the European market, contribute to the enhancement of the standards of life across the continent, demonstrating that the advantages and benefits outweigh the disadvantages and costs of being a fully fledged member of this organization.

In light of their largely *favourable* view of the EU, those on the *centre-left* and those on the *centre-right* were likely to vote in favour of *Remain* (Blairites, Cameronites and so on). In light of their largely *critical* view of the EU, those on the *radical right* were likely to vote in favour of *Leave* (Goveites, Farageites and so on). In light of their deeply *ambivalent* view of the EU, the case of those on the *radical left* is more complicated: while many of them abstained from voting or simply cast a blank vote, most of them were more likely to vote in favour of *Remain* as 'the lesser of two evils' option (Corbynites and so on).

The ideological scheme outlined above is, of course, a reductive account of what is, in reality, a far more multifaceted picture. Even this four-dimensional simplification of the motivational background against which politicians made their case and citizens cast their vote, however, illustrates the complexity that permeates the decision-making process of the 2016 UK Referendum – a degree of complexity to which, in terms of both the act of voting itself and the far-reaching consequences of the overall result, a binary choice between Remain and Leave cannot do justice.

If, however, it is true that, as various commentators have argued and large numbers of voters have openly admitted, the Brexit vote was, to a considerable degree, a *protest vote*, then we need to ask *what* many, if not most, of those who voted in support of Brexit actually voted *against*.

> Brexit was a vote *against London, globalization and multiculturalism* as much as a vote *against Europe*.[11]
>
> Arguably, Brexit was also a vote *for some version of the past*. Fully 75 percent of those aged 18 to 24 voted for a future in Europe. Sixty-one percent of those over 65, along with a majority of all those over 45, voted against.[12]
>
> Brexit was manifestly a vote *against multiculturalism* and *for English nationalism*.[13]
>
> The Brexit campaign wasn't driven by arguments about costs and benefits. It was driven by *resentment, frustration and anger*. It was *emotional and expressive*. And the grievances expressed had real foundations, even if the EU was a partially misplaced target and *no practical solutions* were offered.[14]

The main question with which we are confronted in this respect concerns the aforementioned *divisions* that, presumably, exist in contemporary Britain and have shaped the outcome of the referendum in a decisive manner.

In a schematic, and admittedly simplifying, fashion, these divisions can be described as follows:

Remain:	Leave:
empowered	disempowered
winners	losers
wealthy	poor
employed	unemployed
highly educated	poorly educated
university-educated	non-university-educated
white or pink collar	blue collar
tertiary sector	primary and secondary sectors
young	old
18–44-year-olds	45–65-plus-year-olds
urban	rural
Scotland/Northern Ireland	England/Wales
South-East/North-West England	North-East/South-West England
centre-left/centre-right	radical right (some radical left)
progressive	conservative
Labour/Liberals/Greens	UKIP/right-wing Conservatives
'Modern Conservatives'	'Traditional Conservatives'
cosmopolitan/globalist	parochial/nationalist
modern(ist)	traditional(ist)
multicultural	monocultural
outward-looking	inward-looking
non-white (Asian/black) British	white British
multilingual	monolingual
Muslim	Christian
Catholic	Anglican/Protestant
From the Remain perspective:	
prudent	imprudent
status-quo-affirmative	status-quo-resentful
risk-averse	risk-taking
From the Leave perspective:	
boring	exciting
lacklustre	inspiring
unimaginative	imaginative
From both perspectives:	
pessimistic	optimistic
optimistic	pessimistic
negative	positive
positive	negative
past-oriented	future-oriented
future-oriented	past-oriented

For the right or the wrong reasons, these are widely considered the *key divisions* to which commentators across the board – that is, from different angles, with different emphases and within different explanatory frameworks – refer in their various analyses and assessments of the Brexit vote.[15] Of course, one may engage in endless debates concerning both the role and the significance of each of these (real or alleged) divisions in British society. Irrespective of how one chooses to interpret their roots and ramifications, it is difficult to deny – regardless of one's view of the relationship between the UK and the EU – that they played a pivotal role in shaping the outcome of the referendum. In essence, these divisions may be classified as follows:

- *social* divisions
  (empowered versus disempowered, winners versus losers)
- *economic* divisions
  (wealthy versus poor, employed versus unemployed)
- *educational* divisions
  (highly educated versus poorly educated, university-educated versus non-university-educated)
- *professional* divisions
  (white- or pink-collar workers versus blue-collar workers, tertiary-sector workers versus primary- and secondary-sector workers)
- *generational* divisions
  (young versus old, 18–44-year-olds versus 45–65-plus-year-olds)
- *geographic* divisions
  (urban versus rural, Scotland/Northern Ireland versus England/Wales, South-East/North-West England versus North-East/South-West England)
- *political* divisions
  (centre-left/centre-right versus radical right, progressive versus conservative, Labour/Liberals/Greens versus UKIP/right-wing Conservatives, 'Modern Conservatives' versus 'Traditional Conservatives')
- *ideological* divisions
  (cosmopolitan/globalist versus parochial/nationalist, modernist versus traditionalist)
- *cultural* divisions
  (multicultural versus monocultural, outward-looking versus inward-looking)
- *ethnic* divisions
  (non-white British versus white British, multilingual versus monolingual)
- *religious* divisions
  (Muslim versus Christian, Catholic versus Anglican/Protestant)
- *attitudinal* divisions
  (*Remain perspective:* prudent versus imprudent, status-quo-affirmative versus status-quo-resentful, risk-averse versus risk-taking)
  (*Leave perspective:* boring versus exciting, lacklustre versus inspiring, unimaginative versus imaginative)

(*Remain perspective:* pessimistic versus optimistic, negative versus positive, past-oriented versus future-oriented)
(*Leave perspective:* optimistic versus pessimistic, positive versus negative, future-oriented versus past-oriented)

The types of division to which most commentators, notably those on the left of the political spectrum, tend to attribute the greatest importance are (1) social, (2) economic, (3) educational, (4) professional, (5) generational, (6) geographic, (7) political and (8) ideological divisions. Surely, one needs to treat all figures used in support of this division-focused interpretation of the Brexit vote with caution, in order not to fall into the trap of relying on reductionist explanations as to why particular sectors of the UK population voted one way or another. At the same time, however, it is crucial to recognize the role that each of these divisions played in influencing the outcome of the referendum, insofar as they are indicative of the extent to which UK citizens' *attitudes* towards the EU in particular and towards Europe in general are profoundly shaped by the *positions* that they occupy within British society. More importantly, the question that poses itself is why the Remain campaign failed (whereas the Leave campaign managed) to appeal to particular sectors of the population, especially to those who – had they been convinced not only by the benefits and advantages of staying in the EU, but also by the more universal and long-term historical implications of continued UK membership – could have easily swung the result the other way.

It has become a cliché to compare the current situation to the historical period of the 1930s in continental Europe, but it is indeed worrying, and potentially disastrous, that progressive political forces – not only in the UK, but also in other countries – tend to disregard the counterintuitive truth that the marginalized, excluded, deprived, disenfranchised and disempowered sectors of the population do not necessarily hold opinions and subscribe to normative discourses, let alone cast their vote, in accordance with what critical sociologists – notably, those who examine the social world in Marxist, feminist, Bourdieusian or Chomskyan terms – would consider their *real* interests. The 'like turkeys voting for Christmas' idiom – although it certainly applies to the Brexit vote, because those who have been misled will ultimately have to pay the bill – is not sufficiently radical in that it misses one vital point: turkeys do not have a vote, whereas citizens – including the most underprivileged among them – do have a vote and, more importantly, will have to face the consequences of 'Christmas' as *living*, rather than dead, beings. It remains to be seen how lively life after (or, possibly, without) Brexit will be for them.

IV. Legitimacy

This part shall offer some critical reflections on the *legitimacy* – or, as some may argue, illegitimacy – of the 2016 UK Referendum's outcome. The result of the 2016 UK Referendum has triggered one of the most serious political crises in Europe since the end of World War II. In public discourse, one of the most striking words used to describe the post-referendum situation in the UK is *uncertainty*.

It appears, then, that the post-referendum scenario constitutes a historical context characterized by an enormous – and, in many ways, unprecedented – degree of social, political

and economic uncertainty. In the best-case scenario, it will lead to the temporary *weakening* of the UK's position in Europe; in the worst-case scenario, it will result not only in the gradual *decline* of the UK's influence on the world stage but also in its *break-up*. Of course, supporters of Scottish and Irish independence are unlikely to conceive of the UK's shrinking to a binational union between England and Wales as a 'worst-case scenario', given that their formal and definitive separation from these two British 'home nations' is what they have been striving for all along. The issue of the different possible post-Brexit scenarios put aside, an important question that needs to be addressed concerns the very legitimacy – or, as some may conclude, illegitimacy – of the 2016 UK Referendum's outcome. In this respect, we need to take into account a number of key dimensions, on the basis of which the legitimacy of this referendum can – or, perhaps, must – be called into question.

1.

Large proportions of the electorate were *misled* by the Leave campaign, whose main slogans, propositions and promises were based on lies, gross inaccuracies, major misrepresentations and populist sound bites.

2.

The electoral choice between Remain and Leave was unjustifiably *simplistic*. The issues at stake – notwithstanding the question of whether or not they could be grasped by the average voter – were too significant, too complex and too far-reaching to be decided in terms of a choice between two options.

3.

The binary electoral choice between Remain and Leave was unduly, as well as deceptively, *polarizing*. Both in ideological and in sociological terms, the reasons why electors voted one way or another were sufficiently *diverse* to suggest that the reduction of the profound heterogeneity of normative positions on the EU to a polarized and polarizing choice between Remain and Leave was not only procedurally inadequate but also politically treacherous. It is simply absurd that both politicians and voters who, in many cases, held *radically different views* found themselves 'in the same boat' by having their opinions and voices reduced to one of the two options. There were far more than two sides to the argument.

4.

Referenda in the UK – especially if they are of major national and international significance, with vast long-term consequences, not only for the home population but also for Europe in particular and the world in general – are *consultative*, rather than decisive. A striking feature of the UK political system – ever since it came into existence during the Glorious Revolution in 1688 – is that it prescribes that *Westminster* possesses *sovereign*

decision-making power. It is the legislative force of representative democracy embodied in the UK parliament, rather than the advisory function of referenda, by virtue of which decisions are taken to govern the country. Whatever one makes of the UK's political system, which, in many respects, is shaped by the anachronistic legacy of the late seventeenth century and several features of which may be interpreted as an obsolete hangover from the past, the country remains a *representative democracy*, in which *sovereign power lies with, and is exercised by, Parliament*. In other words, Parliament needs to debate, and to vote on, the result of the referendum. Bearing in mind the magnitude of the numerous issues that are at stake, it would be democratically legitimate for the Westminster Parliament to decide *not* to invoke Article 50, if the majority of its members came to the conclusion that the consequences of withdrawing from the EU would be too severe, if not catastrophic, not only in the short term but also, more importantly, in the long term.

5.

Unlike other countries (such as Switzerland) in which referenda are common practice, the UK does *not* have any clear, detailed and explicit *rules and regulations* about the decision-making power of referenda, that is, about the premises that define whether or not they are binding. Particularly important issues in this regard are the *size* of the majority vote as well as the *distribution* of the votes across different regions and the four 'home nations'. Given that the overall result was extremely close (51.89 per cent in favour of Leave and 48.11 per cent in favour of Remain), and given that it was evenly split between the four 'home nations' (England and Wales in favour of Leave versus Scotland and Northern Ireland in favour of Remain), it is far from obvious that the Leave campaign has a democratic mandate to go ahead with Brexit. If just above half a million (approximately six hundred thousand) UK electors had voted Remain instead of Leave, the result would have been the opposite. Two 'home nations' have (in the case of Scotland, resolutely and overwhelmingly) voted in favour of remaining within the EU. Dragging them, against their will, out of the EU would not only be *undemocratic* but also, most likely, lead to the *break-up* of the UK. Considering the extensive scope of the consequences triggered by Brexit, it is difficult to see how those engaging in the formal procedure of taking the UK out of the EU could claim to possess a legitimate, let alone a solid, democratic mandate. Assessing the legitimacy of the 2016 UK Referendum, the two key issues at stake are 'the *matter* put to referendum and the actual *procedure* of holding the referendum'[16]: the latter was highly inappropriate for dealing with, let alone doing justice to, the enormity of the former.

6.

Constitutional democracies must have rules and regulations in place that prevent the *misuse* of referenda as mere instruments to push through normative agendas that, if they are implemented, have vast social, political and economic consequences – especially if these, at least in the medium term, are irreversible. It is no accident that, for example, the Federal Republic of Germany – in light of the German experience with referenda in the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) and, subsequently, in the consolidation of Nazi

fascism (1933–1945)[17] – substantially limited the decision-making power of referenda within its own territory (both in its pre-reunification period, 1949–1990, and in its post-reunification period, 1990–present) and practically confined their role to the federal level of the *Länder*.[18] Surely, one can engage in enlightening debates on the pros and cons of referenda. There are strong arguments in favour of referenda – such as their tendency to spark political engagement, discussion and controversy at the grass-roots level and, thus, their potential contributions to the realization of radical, direct and participatory forms of democracy.[19] Yet, referenda are politically dangerous to the degree that they tend to *polarize* opinion and foster the emergence of *populist* discourses, based on reductive rhetoric and catchy slogans, rather than on in-depth critical analysis. Referenda may be suitable for case-specific policies and/or legislative matters, although even at such an issue-focused level they are far from unproblematic. When electorates are asked to voice their opinion, or to make a judgement or a choice, on *a large and complex range of interconnected societal issues* by virtue of *one single binary-choice vote*, referenda are largely inappropriate as reliable instruments for democratic, informed and responsible decision-making processes.

7.

It is true that, as previously examined, the 2016 UK Referendum is indicative of numerous deep *divisions* that exist within British society. Of course, one may rightly add that, to a greater or lesser extent, such an epiphenomenalist analysis of the electorate applies to *every* parliamentary election in British history. In this case, however, we are dealing not only with a referendum, rather than with a parliamentary election, but also with a large-scale scenario – the possibility of Brexit – the consequences of which may be not only profoundly damaging, if not catastrophic, but also, in several respects, irreversible.

- When reflecting on *social* divisions (empowered versus disempowered, winners versus losers) and on *economic* divisions (wealthy versus poor, employed versus unemployed), it is important to concede that it is widely acknowledged that, for a large number of electors, the Brexit vote was – and was meant to be – a *protest vote*. 'Ironically many of those who voted Brexit will bear the worst costs of economic decline and financial crisis and in the end the elites win.'[20]
- When reflecting on *educational* divisions (highly educated versus poorly educated, university-educated versus non-university-educated) and on *professional* divisions (white- or pink-collar workers versus blue-collar workers, tertiary-sector workers versus primary- and secondary-sector workers), it is important to account for the fact that, for a large number of electors, the Brexit vote was based on *misinformation* and *deception*. Ironically, many of those who voted Brexit were those who lacked accurate information on what it actually meant in terms of its far-reaching consequences.[21]
- When reflecting on *generational* divisions (young versus old, 18–44- year-olds versus 45– 65-plus-year-olds), it is important to note that the age group that voted overwhelmingly in favour of Leave – that is, the 45–65-plus-year-old electors – is constituted by those British citizens whose future will be affected by the Brexit vote for the *shortest* time span,

whereas the age group that voted overwhelmingly in favour of Remain – that is, the 18–44-year-old electors – is constituted by those British citizens whose future will be affected by the Brexit vote for the *longest* time span. Ironically, the majority of the 45– 65-plus-year-old voters decided over the long-term future – and against the will – of the majority of the 18–44-year-old voters.

- When reflecting on *geographic* divisions (urban versus rural, Scotland/Northern Ireland versus England/Wales, South-East/North-West England versus North-East/South- West England), it is important to face up to the intricacy permeating the Brexit-vote situation: if the UK were to go ahead with Brexit, the two 'home nations' that voted in favour of Leave – that is, England and Wales – would drag those two 'home nations' that voted in favour of Remain – Scotland and Northern Ireland – into a future that, while it might be desired by the majority of the former's electorate, was *not* desired by the majority of the latter's electorate. Ironically, what was, in the eyes of the Brexiteers, meant to be a collective political act oriented towards the re-establishment of 'national' sovereignty, independence and autonomy, and thus towards the strengthening of the UK's position on the world stage, might turn out to be a *divisive* political act resulting in *national break-up* – and, hence, not only in the weakening of the UK's position on the world stage, but also in its dissolution or at least its shrinking to 'an ever smaller union' between England and Wales.
- When reflecting on *political* divisions (centre-left/centre-right versus radical right, progressive versus conservative, Labour/Liberals/Greens versus UKIP/right-wing Conservatives, 'Modern Conservatives' versus 'Traditional Conservatives'), it is important not to underestimate the long-term consequences of the Brexit vote on the *UK parliamentary system*. What was meant to be little more than Cameron's attempt to resolve an internal conflict in the Conservative Party turned out to lead to the most severe constitutional crisis in modern British history. Ironically, the Eurosceptic and Europhobic supporters of the right wing of the Conservative Party and those of UKIP – who, overall, represent a relatively small minority at Westminster – were given the opportunity to mobilize ill-informed preconceptions, prejudices and resentments about the EU, to such an extent that *pro-European and Europhile Members of Parliament (MPs)* – who, overall, represent a considerable *majority at Westminster* (modern/moderate Conservative MPs, most Labour MPs and literally all Liberal MPs) – are forced into a situation in which they have to implement, and to legitimize, a political project that they did not support in the first place and in which the only room for manoeuvre appears to be the option of translating 'hard Brexit' into 'soft Brexit', rather than into 'no Brexit' at all.[22]
- When reflecting on *ideological* divisions (cosmopolitan/globalist versus parochial/nationalist, modernist versus traditionalist), it is important to spell out that, no matter how hard most Brexiteers – and so-called reluctant Bremainers – try to reassure both UK citizens and the international community that Brexit is not about taking the UK out of *Europe* but only about liberating it from the alleged chains of the *EU*, it does represent a *major paradigm shift* from a cosmopolitan and outward-looking *United* Kingdom to an increasingly parochial and inward-looking *Divided* Kingdom, reduced to an alliance of 'Little England' and 'Little Wales', whose future may be shaped by the hegemony of neoliberal austerity, law-and-order and anti-immigration policies. Ironically,

the imaginary of 'an even greater (and more British) Great Britain' may translate into the reality of 'an even smaller (and more English) Small Britain'.

- When reflecting on *cultural* divisions (multicultural versus monocultural, outward-looking versus inward-looking), it is important to highlight that the UK has always been, and will always remain, a *multicultural* society. As such, it is made up not only of four 'home nations' – that is, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – but also of inhabitants with diverse cultural backgrounds from different parts of the world. In fact, ever since it came into existence, 'there has been no independent Britain, no "Island nation" '[23] – at least not in the strict sense of an economically self-sufficient, politically disconnected and culturally homogenous entity. Ironically, the Brexit campaign gave the misleading impression that a Brexit vote would pave the way for the construction of an independent Brexitania, whose citizens' identity would be based on a monoculturally defined sense of pure, pristine and patriotic Britishness, thereby repudiating its multiculturally constituted constitution and socially eclectic heritage.
- When reflecting on *ethnic* divisions (non-white British versus white British, multilingual versus monolingual), it is important to point out that the UK has always been, and will always remain, a *multi-ethnic* society. In the run-up to the 2014 referendum, 'the most visceral attacks'[24] launched by the Brexit campaigners 'came in relation to a sense of that national community having been betrayed by a metropolitan elite that appeared to care more for the situation of "non-British" others than it did for the "legitimate" citizens of Britain'.[25] Ironically, the rise of discursive (and, in some cases, physical) assaults on ethnic minorities before and after the Brexit vote is not primarily an expression of the divisions between the UK and the EU but, above all, a manifestation of the ethnic – and, on many levels, racialized – divisions within British society itself.[26]
- When reflecting on *religious* divisions (Muslim versus Christian, Catholic versus Anglican/Protestant), it is important to stress that, according to most statistics available on this matter[27], the religious groups that, for the right or the wrong reasons, are often perceived as 'backward-looking', namely Catholics and Muslims, voted overwhelmingly in favour of Remain, whereas the religious groups that, for the right or the wrong reasons, are frequently perceived as 'forward-looking', namely Anglicans and Protestants, tended to vote in favour of Leave.[28] Ironically, then, the parameters of 'regressive' and 'progressive' appear to have been turned upside down by the motivational infrastructure of religious electors casting their votes at the 2016 UK Referendum.
- When reflecting on *attitudinal* divisions (*Remain perspective:* prudent versus imprudent, status-quo-affirmative versus status-quo-resentful, risk-averse versus risk-taking; *Leave perspective:* boring versus exciting, lacklustre versus inspiring, unimaginative versus imaginative; *Remain perspective:* pessimistic versus optimistic, negative versus positive, past-oriented versus future-oriented; *Leave perspective:* optimistic versus pessimistic, positive versus negative, future-oriented versus past-oriented), it is important to remark that, in a somewhat stereotypical way, the two camps were caricatured *by each other* on the basis of diametrically opposed mindsets.
  – According to the Bremainers, the Leave campaign was imprudent, status-quo-resentful and unnecessarily risk-taking.

  - According to the Brexiteers, the Remain campaign was boring, lacklustre and unimaginative.
- On some levels, both campaigns accused one another of very similar, if not the same, limitations, but they did so for diametrically opposed reasons.
  - According to the Bremainers, the Leave campaign was pessimistic, negative and past-oriented: it painted a misleadingly bleak – and, arguably, distorted – picture of the UK's annual financial contribution to the EU as well as of the EU-based immigrants freely moving to the UK, and it mobilized a nostalgic collective imaginary promising the restoration of national sovereignty, comparable to the era of the British Empire, in a post-Brexit reality.
  - According to the Brexiteers, the Remain campaign was pessimistic, negative and past-oriented: it painted a misleadingly bleak – and, arguably, distorted – picture of the UK's life outside the EU, underestimating its ability to govern itself and to break out of the straitjacket of the EU's bureaucracy and lack of accountability as well as to challenge the EU's structural incapacity to deal with, let alone to prevent, the financial and the migration crises. In their view, Brexit is, above all, about the UK's right to reconvert itself into the protagonist of its own future.
  - From the point of view of the Bremainers, the Brexiteers *overstated* the advantages and *understated* the disadvantages of leaving the EU.
  - From the point of view of the Brexiteers, the Bremainers *overstated* the advantages and *understated* the disadvantages of staying in the EU.
- Ironically, then, Bremainers and Brexiteers accused one another of very similar – if not nominally equivalent – limitations, but when doing so they made their respective cases on the basis of diametrically opposed reasons.

V. Prospects

The primary aim of the following reflections is to make some tentative remarks on the prospects of different Brexit scenarios – not only in relation to the UK, but also in relation to the EU in particular and the wider international community in general. One may speculate about what exactly is going to happen in the UK over the next few months, years and decades. As illustrated in the preceding sections, the UK is a country characterized by profound *divisions* – notably, by social, educational, generational, geographic, political, ideological, cultural, ethnic, religious and attitudinal divisions. Paradoxically, these divisions make it both relatively easy and relatively difficult to formulate hypotheses about future developments.

- On the one hand, it does not take a genius to predict that these *divisions* – owing to their deep, multilayered and far-reaching constitution – are *unlikely to disappear any time soon*. If anything, the degree of their significance and intensity will increase, meaning that – both within and outside the EU, both in the short term and in the long term – the governability of the UK will be highly complex and the country's overall development, as a society, will suffer from a *lack of cross-sectional unity and cohesion*.
- On the other hand, we have to accept that it is far from certain how exactly these divisions – which are tension-laden, contradictory and potentially destructive at many levels – will

evolve and how precisely they will manifest themselves in *political trends and developments of the future*. It sounds like a cliché, but, faced with the numerous variables shaping the current situation in the UK, the only real certainty is the presence of a *profound sense of uncertainty*.

Despite the seriousness of the limbo in which the UK finds itself in the aftermath of the 2016 Referendum, it is possible to identify – broadly speaking – *six scenarios*, some of which are more likely, and some of which are less likely, to emerge within the near future.

Scenario 1: 'Straight Hard Brexit'

The first possibility is the *'straight hard Brexit' scenario*. In this scenario, Article 50 will be triggered in early or mid-2017, the negotiations between the UK and the EU about the details of Brexit will commence and last for approximately two years, and by the end of 2019 the UK will have completely withdrawn from the EU, without being a member of the EEA and without continuing to subscribe to the 'Four Freedoms' principle. This scenario would do justice to the slogans 'out means out' and 'Brexit means Brexit'.

Scenario 2: 'Straight Soft Brexit'

The second possibility is the *'straight soft Brexit' scenario*. In this scenario, Article 50 will be triggered in early or mid-2017, the negotiations between the UK and the EU about the details of Brexit will commence and last for two to three years, and by 2019/2020 the UK will have formally withdrawn from the EU, but it will remain a member of the EEA and will effectively continue to subscribe to the 'Four Freedoms' principle. In formal terms, the UK will cease to be a member of the EU; in practical terms, however, it will continue to have access to the European Single Market, paying a heavy price for this privilege, in addition to not being able to sit at the EU decision-making table.

Scenario 3: 'Relegitimized Hard Brexit'

The third possibility is the *'relegitimized hard Brexit' scenario*. In this scenario, Article 50 will be triggered in early or mid-2017, the negotiations between the UK and the EU about the details of Brexit will commence and last for two to three years, by 2019/2020 the UK government – after having presented the main aspects of the proposed deal with the EU (which will consist in the UK formally withdrawing from *both* the EU *and* the EEA) to the general public – will call a general election and/or hold a referendum, and – with the democratic mandate of a newly elected Leave government and/or a Leave referendum result – the UK will officially accept the deal on offer and, consequently, cease to be a member not only of the EU but also of the EEA.

Scenario 4: 'Relegitimized Soft Brexit'

The fourth possibility is the *'relegitimized soft Brexit' scenario*. In this scenario, Article 50 will be triggered in early or mid-2017, the negotiations between the UK and the EU about

the details of Brexit will commence and last for two to three years, by 2019/2020 the UK government – after having presented the main aspects of the proposed deal with the EU (which will consist in the UK formally withdrawing from the EU, but maintaining its EEA membership) to the general public – will call a general election and/or hold a referendum, and – with the democratic mandate of a newly elected Leave government and/or a Leave referendum result – the UK will officially accept the deal on offer and continue to be a member of the EEA, but cease to be a member of the EU.

Scenario 5: 'Autocratic No Brexit'

The fifth possibility is the *'autocratic no Brexit' scenario*. In this scenario, Article 50 will be triggered in early or mid-2017, the negotiations between the UK and the EU about the details of Brexit will commence and last for two to three years, and by 2019/2020 the UK government, *without* holding another referendum and *before* calling another election, will officially reject the deal on offer and decide to remain a member of the EU.

Scenario 6: 'Legitimized No Brexit'

The sixth possibility is the *'legitimized no Brexit' scenario*. In this scenario, Article 50 will be triggered in early or mid-2017, the negotiations between the UK and the EU about the details of Brexit will commence and last for two to three years, by 2019/2020 the UK government – after having presented the main aspects of the proposed deal with the EU (which will consist in the UK formally withdrawing from both the EU and the EEA) to the general public – will call a general election and/or hold a referendum, and – with the democratic mandate of a newly elected Remain government and/or a Remain referendum result – the UK will officially reject the deal on offer and remain a member of the EU.

*** *** ***

What is the likelihood of one of these scenarios becoming reality? Arguably, there are strong reasons to believe that a realistic predictive assessment – in the order *from 'least likely' to 'most likely'* – looks roughly as follows:

Scenario 5: 'Autocratic No Brexit'

The *'autocratic no Brexit' scenario* is the *least likely* scenario, not only because it would be difficult to sell to the British electorate, but also because it would be difficult to sell to the international community, including the EU. It would deprive the UK government of both internal and external legitimacy. Although it would prevent both the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the break-up of the four-nation state from happening, it would be extremely damaging to the country's future.

Scenario 1: 'Straight Hard Brexit'

The *'straight hard Brexit' scenario* is the *second-least likely* scenario, not only because it would be difficult to sell to the British public, but also because it would simply not be in the long-term interest of the UK to find itself not only outside the EU but also outside the EEA and, thus, detached from the European Single Market, with which its economy is deeply entangled and upon which it is profoundly dependent.

Scenario 3: 'Relegitimized Hard Brexit'

The *'relegitimized hard Brexit' scenario* is the *third-least likely* scenario, not only because leaving *both* the EU *and* the EEA would be almost tantamount to political and economic suicide, but also because this radical Leave option would be unlikely to obtain a democratic mandate on the basis of a newly elected government and/or another referendum. Still, a 'relegitimized hard Brexit' scenario is slightly more likely than a 'straight hard Brexit' scenario, because even a Conservative government will do everything it can (including holding an election and/or another referendum) to avoid any kind of 'hard Brexit' scenario, given that leaving *both* the EU *and* the EEA is not in the UK's strategic interest.

Scenario 2: 'Straight Soft Brexit'

The *'straight soft Brexit' scenario* is the *third-most likely* scenario, not only because it would minimize the disadvantages of leaving the EU by maximizing the advantages of remaining in the EEA, but also because this option would allow the current government to 'get on with the job' without having to obtain another democratic mandate on the basis of an additional election and/or referendum.

Scenario 4: 'Relegitimized Soft Brexit'

The *'relegitimized soft Brexit' scenario* is the *joint most likely* scenario, not only because it would minimize the disadvantages of leaving the EU by maximizing the advantages of remaining in the EEA, but also because this option could reasonably find public support on the basis of a general election and/or another referendum.

Scenario 6: 'Legitimized No Brexit'

The *'legitimized no Brexit' scenario* is the other *joint most likely* scenario, not only because it would permit the UK to enjoy the advantages of remaining in both the EU and the EEA, but also because, on the basis of another general election and/or another referendum, it would bestow the government with sufficient political legitimacy to keep the UK in the EU.

Wishful Thinking?

Those of us who harbour the hope that the Brexit referendum result was just a bad dream tend to suggest that the *'legitimized no Brexit' scenario* may well become reality. Granted, wishful thinking can be the source – or, indeed, the product – of fallacious reasoning, but there are strong grounds for the view that the 'legitimized no Brexit' scenario is *not* an impossible scenario – far from it. It is difficult to know what is currently going on 'behind the scenes' of the Westminster establishment and what kind of short-term and long-term strategies are *really* being adopted by the government's key players. It seems to me that, for the reasons outlined above, the current UK administration is likely to be preparing (and aiming) for one of the following three scenarios: *'straight soft Brexit' (scenario 2)*, *'relegitimized soft Brexit' (scenario 4)* and/or *'legitimized no Brexit' (scenario 6)*. None of these scenarios is ideal, and all of them (including the 'autocratic no Brexit' and 'hard Brexit' scenarios) are fraught with difficulties. It is probable, however, that the only way in which the UK can guarantee that, in the long run, it will survive both as a *strong* player (in Europe in particular and on the world stage in general) and as a *united* player (representing not only England and Wales but also Scotland and Northern Ireland) will be by ensuring that Brexit does not become a *real* reality. Even the softest and most (re-)legitimized forms of Brexit will involve the substantial risk of triggering the break-up of the UK – a price that no UK government is likely to be willing to pay.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to contribute to a critical understanding of the concept of Brexit. It has done so by addressing a number of key issues, all of which are crucial to a comprehensive analysis of Brexit – notably, with regard to its meaning, its historical conditioning, its sociological implications, its wider legitimacy (or lack thereof) and the different scenarios in which it may (or may not) be implemented.

The first part has provided a shorthand *definition* of the concept of Brexit, stating that, in essence, it refers to the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. As explained above, advocates and opponents of Brexit tend to agree that, if Brexit is implemented by the UK government, its multiple consequences are of major historical significance – not only for the country itself, but also for the EU and, arguably, for the entire world.

The second part has reflected on the historical *context* in which, on 23 June 2016, the UK referendum on EU membership took place, arguing that the former had a profound impact on the latter's outcome. In this respect, the conjunction of three phenomena – which have contributed to the triumph of the Leave campaign – are especially important: a *world problem*, a *European or EU problem* and a *British problem*. These problems are indicative of the prevalent disillusionment with and alienation from mainstream political structures, practices and actors at the global, continental and national levels. Arguably, these are not limited to the UK. In fact, the Brexit scenario may be succeeded by further national exits from the EU – a domino-effect situation that the EU will seek to avoid at all cost and that, although it may seem unlikely to occur, cannot be ruled out.

The third part has shed light on the various sociological *implications* of the result of the 2016 UK Referendum, paying particular attention to the principal reasons that led to the triumph of the Leave campaign over the Remain campaign. As illustrated above, numerous *divisions* that exist in contemporary Britain appear to have shaped the outcome of the referendum in a decisive manner. In this respect, the following types of division are particularly significant: (1) social, (2) economic, (3) educational, (4) professional, (5) generational, (6) geographic, (7) political, (8) ideological, (9) cultural, (10) ethnic, (11) religious and (12) attitudinal. As stressed in the preceding inquiry, all figures used in support of this division-focused interpretation of the Brexit vote need to be treated with caution. It would be erroneous to rely on reductionist explanations as to why particular sectors of the UK population voted one way or another – not least because, with the exception of the *geographic* distribution of the Brexit vote, the validity of most of the division-focused data is extremely difficult to verify. Determinist explanations of voting patterns can hardly be illuminating when trying to explore why particular sectors of the electorate voted one way or another. *Different citizens vote differently not only for many different reasons but also because they themselves, as individual electors, may be motivated by a variety of reasons and influenced by a variety of factors, irrespective of whether or not these fall into division-specific patterns.* It is nonetheless crucial to recognize that these divisions *substantially* affected the outcome of the referendum, indicating the extent to which UK citizens' *attitudes* towards the EU in particular and towards Europe in general are profoundly shaped by the *positions* that they occupy within British society. There is no point in speculating about the future of a Brexit (or, indeed, a non-Brexit) scenario if we, as critical sociologists, fail to grapple with both the causes and the consequences of these numerous, and arguably profound, divisions. When making assumptions about prospective developments in the UK, however, it is imperative not to underestimate the *complexity* permeating the confluence of, and tensions between, central issues and interests that are at stake in the gradual consolidation of specific Brexit scenarios. Whatever may, or may not, happen at the governmental level cannot be dissociated from what may, or may not, happen at the societal level. It remains to be seen what life in the UK after (or, possibly, without) Brexit will look like.

The fourth part has offered some critical reflections on the *legitimacy* – or, as some may argue, illegitimacy – of the 2016 UK Referendum's outcome. From a historical perspective, it is difficult to understate, let alone to overlook, the fact that the result of the 2016 UK Referendum has triggered one of the most serious political crises in Europe since the end of World War II. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that, in contemporary public discourse, the term 'uncertainty' is widely employed to describe the post-referendum situation in the UK. The post-referendum scenario constitutes a historical context characterized by an enormous – and, in many ways, unprecedented – degree of social, political and economic uncertainty. From the point of view of the British government, this unparalleled state of affairs will – in the best-case scenario – lead to the temporary *weakening* of the UK's position in Europe or – in the worst-case scenario – result not only in the *decline* of the UK's influence on the world stage but also in its *break-up*. Notwithstanding one's assessment of the different possible post-Brexit scenarios, an important question that needs to be addressed concerns the very legitimacy – or, as some may conclude,

illegitimacy – of the 2016 UK Referendum's outcome. As elucidated above, there are several key considerations on the basis of which the legitimacy of this referendum can – or, perhaps, must – be called into question, notably the following:

1. Large proportions of the electorate were *misled* by the Leave campaign.
2. The binary electoral choice between Remain and Leave was unjustifiably *simplistic*, taking into account both the magnitude and the complexity of the issues at stake.
3. The electoral choice between Remain and Leave was unduly, as well as deceptively, *polarizing* – that is, it was not only procedurally inadequate but also politically treacherous.
4. In the UK, where the Westminster Parliament possesses *sovereign* decision-making power, referenda are *consultative*, rather than decisive.
5. Unlike countries in which referenda are common practice, the UK does *not* have any clear, detailed and explicit *rules and regulations* about the decision-making power of referenda.
6. Constitutional democracies must have rules and regulations in place that prevent the *misuse* of referenda as mere instruments to push through normative agendas that, if implemented, have vast social, political and economic consequences – especially if these, at least in the medium term, are irreversible.
7. In light of the numerous and profound *divisions* that substantially influenced the outcome of the 2016 UK Referendum, we are confronted with a number of ironies – or, rather, harsh realities – that undermine its legitimacy. Those who least wanted to trigger, and/or least deserved to be affected by, the potentially harsh consequences of Brexit are those who may be hit hardest by the long-term effects of its implementation.

The fifth part has made some tentative remarks on the *prospects* of the Brexit scenario – not only in relation to the UK, but also in relation to the EU in particular and the wider international community in general. As argued in this chapter, the numerous and profound divisions that exist in contemporary British society will be crucial to the unfolding of any future scenario. More specifically, the chapter has maintained that it is possible to identify *six scenarios*, some of which are more likely, and some of which are less likely, to unfold within the near future: (1) 'straight hard Brexit', (2) 'straight soft Brexit', (3) 'relegitimized hard Brexit', (4) 'relegitimized soft Brexit', (5) 'autocratic no Brexit' and (6) 'legitimized no Brexit'. The chapter has argued that the options 'autocratic no Brexit', 'straight hard Brexit' and 'relegitimized hard Brexit' are the *least likely* scenarios to become reality – mainly because of their immensely damaging long-term consequences. In addition, the chapter has maintained that 'straight soft Brexit', 'relegitimized soft Brexit' and 'legitimized no Brexit' are the *most likely* scenarios to become reality – essentially because of their capacity to minimize the damage caused by the Brexit vote, while avoiding its most detrimental long-term consequences.

It must be emphasized, however, that none of the 'most likely' scenarios can be regarded as ideal and that, furthermore, all of them (including the 'least likely' scenarios) are fraught with difficulties. Before the Brexit vote, it did not enter many intellectuals' minds 'that populism would defeat capitalism in its country of origin'[29] and that,

eventually, 'identity questions would prevail against interests'[30]. After the Brexit vote, however, it has become abundantly clear that, for large proportions of the population living in the UK, life outside the EU may be even more 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'[31] than it already was before. The prospect of more neoliberal austerity, more law-and-order policy and more anti-immigration sentiment (and strategy) in an even more isolated United (or, possibly, Divided) Kingdom does not sound like a future to which progressive forces, broadly defined, will be looking forward.

Whatever may (or may not) happen in (and with) the UK's short-term and long-term future, however, the pursuit of a 'critical sociology of Brexit' will be vital. Such a collective undertaking is crucial not only for assessing and, if possible, influencing the impact of Brexit on academic life, but also, more importantly, for ensuring that social scientists, irrespective of their disciplinary identity, play a constructive role in shaping society for the better, even – or, perhaps, especially – if history does not appear to be on their side and prospects are, on balance, dire. The first step towards realizing such an ambitious endeavour is to recognize that it is, above all, the divisions *within* European societies, rather than those *between* them, to which we need to face up before taking on the challenging task of building a worthwhile future.

Notes

1 See, for instance: Baimbridge (2006); Baimbridge, Whyman and Mullen (2006); Butler and Kitzinger ((1975) 1996).
2 Outhwaite (2016b), p. 1 (italics added).
3 I owe the main argument underlying this tripartite analysis to William Outhwaite. See ibid. On key issues in the *sociology of contemporary Europe*, see, for instance: Delanty and Rumford (2005); Favell and Guiraudon (2011); Gerhards and Lengfeld (2015); Outhwaite (2006c); Outhwaite (2006a); Outhwaite (2006b); Outhwaite ((2000) 2006); Outhwaite (2008); Outhwaite (2012); Outhwaite (2016a); Sakwa and Stevens ((2000) 2012); Therborn (1995); Triandafyllidou and Gropas (2015).
4 On this point, see, for instance: Basconzuelo, Morel and Susen (2010a); Basconzuelo, Morel and Susen (2010b); Browne and Susen (2014), pp. 224–228; della Porta, Andretta, Mosca and Reiter (2006); Hamel, Lustiger-Thaler, Nederveen Pieterse and Roseneil (2001); Jogdand and Michael (2003); Laraña, Johnston and Gusfield (1994); Mayo (2005); Melucci (1980); Melucci (1994); Nederveen Pieterse (1992); Sklair (1995); Smith and Johnston (2002); Susen (2010a); Susen (2010b), pp. 268–271; Susen (2015), pp. 127, 129, 134, 135, 176, 177, 186, 187, 188, 189 and 272; Touraine ((1992) 1995); Waterman (1998); West (2013).
5 See McCrone (1992). See also Davidson, McCafferty and Miller (2010).
6 On this point, see Nairn ((1977) 1981) and Nairn (2002).
7 Calhoun (2016), p. 54 (italics added).
8 Ibid., p. 50 (italics added).
9 Susen (2015), p. 17.
10 Ibid., p. 17.
11 Calhoun (2016), p. 50 (italics added).
12 Ibid., p. 50 (italics added).
13 Ibid., pp. 50–51 (italics added).
14 Ibid., p. 53 (italics added).
15 See, for example: Abbott, Cressey and van Noorden (2016); Ahluwalia and Miller (2016); Bard-Rosenberg (2016); Bhambra (2016); Calhoun (2016); Clery (2016); Delanty (2016); Dorling

(2016); Edwards (2016); Finlayson (2016a); Finlayson (2016b); Habermas and Assheuer (2016); Horton (2016); Laconangelo (2016); Matthews (2016); McGowan (2016); Outhwaite (2016b); Qvortrup (2016); Reid (2016); Rose (2016); Shuster, Stewart and Walt (2016); Siva (2016); van-den Heuvel (2016); Younge (2016).

16 Delanty (2016), p. 2 (italics added).

17 On 19 August 1934, only 17 days after the death of President Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1934), a referendum on merging the posts of Chancellor (*Reichskanzler*) and President (*Reichspräsident*) was held in Nazi Germany. In essence, the referendum was the German leadership's way of seeking to gain formal and official approval for Adolf Hitler's supreme and unquestionable power. Owing to the crushing outcome of this referendum in favour of his leadership, Hitler was able to claim public support, and arguably 'legitimacy', for his political agenda and future actions.

18 Referenda can be regarded as an integral component of direct democracy in Germany. In practice, however, both their application and their influence are relatively limited. Two types of mandatory and binding referenda exist on the federal level: referenda that can change the *constitution* and referenda that can change the *state territories*. In essence, the German referendum system contains three levels:

(a) *Volksbegehren* (literally, 'people's request'), which is a citizens' initiative; if the government ignores such a request, this can result in a *Volksentscheid* (literally, 'people's decision');
(b) *Volksbefragung* (literally, 'people's inquiry'), which is based on a non-binding facultative ballot question and, in Germany, the most widely used type of referendum;
(c) *Volksentscheid* (literally, *people's decision*), which is, in principle, a binding plebiscite, but which is, in practice, used only if the constitution requires it.

On this point, see, for example: Heussner and Jung ((1999) 2009); Jung (1994); Troitzsch (1979).

19 For excellent discussions of *direct and deliberative models of democracy*, see, for example: Cooke (2000); Eriksen and Weigård (2003); Festenstein (2004); Habermas ((1992) 1996); Habermas (2005); Pellizzoni (2001); Young (1997). See also, for instance: Susen (2015), pp. 75, 106, 109, 187, 212 and 295*n*43.

20 Delanty (2016), p. 3. On this point, see, for instance, Ashcroft (2016), p. 2: 'A majority of those working full-time or part-time voted to remain in the EU; most of those not working voted to leave. More than half of those retired on a private pension voted to leave, as did two thirds of those retired on a state pension.'

21 On this point, see, for instance, Ashcroft (2016), p. 2: 'A majority (57%) of those with a university degree voted to remain, as did 64% of those with a higher degree and more than four in five (81%) of those still in full time education. Among those whose formal education ended at secondary school or earlier, a large majority voted to leave.'

22 On this point, see, for instance, ibid., p. 3: 'A majority of those who backed the Conservatives in 2015 voted to leave the EU (58%), as did more than 19 out of 20 UKIP supporters. Nearly two thirds of Labour and SNP voters (63% and 64%), seven in ten Liberal Democrats and three quarters of Greens, voted to remain.'

23 Bhambra (2016), p. 1.

24 Ibid., p. 1.

25 Ibid., p. 1.

26 On this point, see, for instance, Ashcroft (2016), p. 2: 'White voters voted to leave the EU by 53% to 47%. Two thirds (67%) of those describing themselves as Asian voted to remain, as did three quarters (73%) of black voters.'

27 See, for example, ibid., esp. p. 2.

28 On this point, see, for instance, ibid., p. 2: 'Nearly six in ten (58%) of those describing themselves as Christian voted to leave; seven in ten Muslims voted to remain.'

29 Habermas and Assheuer (2016), p. 1.
30 Ibid., p. 1.
31 Hobbes ((1651) 1996), p. 171.

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