‘And Then Came Brexit’: Experiences and Plans of Young EU Migrants in the London Region

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Plan of presentation

• **YMOBILITY:** Youth Mobility: Maximising Opportunities for Individuals, Labour Markets and Regions in Europe

• **New European Youth Mobilities:** position of UK and London in the geography of flows and stocks of EU migrants

• ‘And then came Brexit’: 23 June 2016 as a moment of ‘rupture’

• **Methods:** 60 interviews with Irish, Italians, Romanians pre-Brexit; 27 re-interviews post-Brexit, answering 6 key questions

• **Theoretical notions:** ‘liquid migration’, ‘youth transitions’, ‘tactics of belonging’, ‘affect’, ‘privilege’

• Findings: predictions and reactions: the affect of Brexit

• Findings: **future plans and uncertainties:** stay put (tactics of belonging), accelerated return, or move on elsewhere
Methods

- First-round YMOBILITY interviews with six EU national groups (Irish, Italians, Spaniards, Latvians, Slovakians, Romanians) carried out September 2015 – May 2016: covering a wide range of themes relating to motivations, experiences and future plans; 120 interviews in all, in the London region.

- For this paper, we choose three groups with different histories of migration to UK and relationships to the EU: Irish, Italians, and Romanians.

- Quota-samples of 8-10 of each of these groups re-interviewed in the months post-Brexit (N=27).

- Six key questions were posed, within a narrative re-interview:
  1. Did you expect the referendum result?
  2. What was your immediate reaction to, and interpretation of, the Brexit result?
  3. What do you think of the new socio-political situation in Britain, and have your experiences of working and living here changed?
  4. Has your sense of ‘home’ or belonging changed as a result of Brexit?
  5. Did Brexit change your plans for the future? For instance about staying short-term or longer-term, returning home etc.
  6. Are you (considering) applying for British citizenship or a residence card?
Theoretical ideas

- **Liquid migration** (Engbersen and Snel 2013): applied to intra-EU and especially post-accession East-West migrations – seen as predominantly work- and study-driven, temporary and open-ended, ‘legal’ and ‘invisible’, spontaneously generated and dominated by young adults. LM’s defining characteristic is ‘intentional unpredictability’.

- **Youth transitions and ruptures** (Hörschelmann 2011): ‘Youth’ is less seen as an age-defined life-stage and more as a process of ‘becoming’ (Worth 2009). However, changing structural conditions surrounding youth (delayed entry to labour market, collapse of linear career trajectories, consumer pressure to prolong youthful lifestyles and appearances) means youth transitions are no longer one-directional towards ‘full adulthood’, but subject to ‘rupture’, with ‘reverse’ and ‘yo-yo’ transitions frequently evident (López Blasco et al. 2003; Walther et al. 2006). For pragmatic reasons, we specify 18-35 years.

- ‘**Tactics of belonging**’ and ‘**weapons of the weak**’ (de Certeau 1984; Scott 1985): deprived of the right to vote in the Referendum (except the ‘privileged’ Irish), EU migrants found themselves at the centre of a controversy they had no means of influencing – they were ‘politically voiceless’ but could engage in ‘tactics’ and ‘weapons of the weak’ by complaining, blogging, keeping a low profile, and stressing their right to ‘belong’.

- ‘**Affect**’: affective atmosphere, affective nationalism (Anderson 2016; Antonsich and Skey 2016; Merriman and Jones 2016): the referendum, for many, produced an ‘affective shock’ (embodied like a punch in the stomach), but also revealing ‘affective nationalism’ – exaggerated feelings and atmospheres of national belonging (amongst Brexiteers), but the reverse for Remainers.
And then came Brexit: key ‘highlights’

- came as a major national surprise, that even the leaders of the Brexit campaign did not actually expect
- revealed a diagnosis of a sharply divided population, with a substantial reservoir of pent-up anger and alienation, both with the ‘political class’ and with deteriorating life conditions, exacerbated by the politics and economics of austerity
- whereas the ‘Remain’ camp’s main message (fronted by PM David Cameron and Chancellor George Osborne) was based on the threat to the economy of leaving the EU, the real message which won the day was the ‘moral panic’ over immigration, stoked by the three ‘Brexiteers’ Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, and ruthlessly pushed by the right-wing tabloid media
- in an age of ‘post-truth politics’, ‘expert knowledge’ was vilified: ‘the experts: what do they know (about ‘real’ life)?’
- so, the slogans that won the day were about ‘taking back control of our sovereignty’ (from the EU) and especially ‘controlling our borders’ at a time of a perceived ‘crisis’ of immigration
It’s Immigration, Stupid!

BREAKING POINT
The EU has failed us all

We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.

Leave the European Union ON 23rd JUNE

08450 752 752
Six Post-Brexit Questions

1. Did you expect the result of the Referendum?
2. How do you feel after Brexit?
3. What do you think now as a [Romanian, Irish, Italian etc.] citizen/passport holder in this new situation?
4. Has your sense of ‘home’ or ‘belonging’ or ‘identity’ changed in the light of Brexit?
5. Has Brexit changed your plans for the future? Referring here to short- and long-term plans about where you want to live/work and settle down?
6. Are you considering applying for British citizenship or a Residence Card?
The ‘Affect’ of Brexit: Q 1 and 2

Q1: Did you expect the Brexit result?
Most said ‘No’, often emphatically so – ‘Absolutely not’. A very few said (but retrospectively) that they ‘saw it coming’.

Q2: What was your immediate reaction? How did you feel when the result was announced?
‘Like shit’ (Laura, 27, Italian)
‘…the feeling was that “You don’t want us anymore”… And you think “What have I done to deserve this?” Because, clearly, it was not a vote on the EU, it was a vote on immigrants’ (Elisa, F36, Italian)
‘…shock and horror!… It totally changed the world history, turned it 180 degrees… The day the result was announced, everyone was very upset, they [colleagues at work] were almost crying’ (Ramona, F21, Romanian)
‘I was really surprised by my response actually, by my kind of emotional response which seemed very involuntary. I was really taken aback… I kind of felt it was a victory for disconnection between people…a terrible thing. But I also felt myself kind of personally offended. I thought, “Fucking hell, there are actually people who don’t want me to be here!”’ (Daniel, M27, Irish)
Qs 3 and 4 are about changed experiences of living and working in Britain, perceptions of the new socio-political situation, and evolving senses of ‘home’ and belonging

• Interestingly it was the Irish who were most angry and outspoken about the implications of Brexit. At least amongst our interviewees, there was no sense of shared victory with the British, even though the Irish have the ‘privilege’ of continued free mobility. Rather, they were upset by the exclusionary nature of the ‘affective nationalism’ (the flags, posters, ‘control our border’ slogans etc.); and emphasised instead their affectively ‘shared migrant identity’ with Europeans and other immigrants increasingly seen as ‘others’. Others referred to the potential negative effects on trade and the Irish border with Northern Ireland. A typical ‘angry narrative’, reflecting a cynical view of British Brexit outcome:

‘For some reason the ‘Leave’ vote has justified racism, and all the massive xenophobes out there suddenly think it’s OK [to be racist]. Who are they to tell a Muslim to go back to their own country or tell a Polish person to go back to their own country? They would never dare to say it to me. They would never dare say that to an Australian… It just makes me so angry; it’s so unfair. I can honestly say that if someone told somebody to go back to their own country in front of me… Oh, I’d have a lot to say!’ (Sandy, M22, Irish).
On the whole the answers to Qs 3 and 4 reflect the view that not much has changed (yet). Some interviewees said that Brexit had made them think a bit more about their home country, their ‘identity’, and where they ‘truly belong’ now. They certainly viewed British politics and society with a more critical and cynical eye, even if most of their British friends and workmates were sympathetic, even apologetic.

Few reported direct experiences of racist incidents or of negativity directed explicit towards them personally: the Romanians were more aware of the likelihood that they were one of the EU nationals groups most targeted by the Brexit camp, partly as a result of Nigel Farage’s inflammatory and disparaging remarks about their group.

However, some interviewees reported negative comments experienced by co-national friends working in other parts of the country, and one of the Italian student interviewees described being beaten up by a group of local teenagers late one night when they asked him for cigarettes and they heard his foreign accent.

Also amongst a few of the Italian interviews, we see signs of an emerging distinction between themselves as ‘old EU’ immigrants, and therefore ‘A class’ and ‘new EU’ immigrants as ‘B class’ and somehow ‘responsible’ for the tide of anti-EU immigrant rhetoric and political feelings around Brexit. Elisa (F36) again: ‘This thing of “immigrant, immigrant”… We are Italian and we are a certain kind of immigrant, A-rank immigrants. If you talk to someone who voted “Leave” to clean the country from… they are talking about people you don’t want – Romanians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, and Turks!’
Qs 5 and 6: Future Plans and Uncertainties

• Brings out the relevance of ‘liquid migration’ – the ongoing open-endedness and temporality of young adults’ migration trajectories and the defining syndrome of ‘intentional unpredictability’ (Engbersen and Snel 2013), which can however be critiqued.

• Some attempts at re-interviews failed because the participants had already left the UK.

• In response to Q5, Has Brexit changed your plans for the future? Most respondents said either ‘No’ or ‘Not yet’ – it depends how Brexit works out. Hence there was a lot of ‘Let’s wait and see’ discussion.

• Three options, in terms of spatial strategy: stay put, return ‘home’, or move to somewhere else (either within or outside EU). For those planning to return anyway, Brexit is largely irrelevant, except perhaps to reinforce or accelerate that decision. For those planning/wanting to stay, the future is rather uncertain: quite apart from the longer-term right to stay (still under discussion by the UK government), travel back home for visits is likely to be subject to more controls at airports etc. Particular challenges and uncertainties are faced by those who have spouses/partners in the UK, and even more so if they have children.

• In so far as one can generalise over a three-way sample of 27, it seems that the three nationalities do represent different sets of plans:
  – the Irish, with their personal and family history of migration, and their probable legal right to stay anyway, have the most options; most indicate a temporary stay, followed by a return to Ireland or in a few cases a move elsewhere
  – the Italians seem keenest to retain their right to stay, and in fact to stay on; they show a rather weak tendency to return-migrate to Italy, at least in the short term
  – the Romanians, albeit reluctantly, seem most resigned to the possibility of departure, reflecting their only recent history of mobility, and their open-ended ideas about moving on to other EU countries.
Qs 5 and 6: illustrative quotes: liquid migration?

- ‘I think it [Brexit] is really negative for this country. I am really glad that I will soon not live in the UK anymore. My organisation will open new headquarters in Berlin… I don’t want to live in a country that has those kind of sentiments… I find it really shocking’ (Eileen F31 Irish; ‘moving on’)

- ‘Then I thought, “Let’s finish this PhD in two years and let’s see”. I have a stronger incentive to do it now. After all, it’s not that I was planning to stay in the UK’ (Laura F27 Italian; ‘accelerating return’)

- ‘We all thought that because we work with all the right documents, this [Brexit] won’t affect us. Because we are not unemployed, we are not living off benefits, we earn our own money, pay our taxes, and we think everything should be alright’ (Mia F25 Romanian; ‘tactics of belonging’)

- ‘If they kick me out of England, it’s not the worst thing ever, because I can go to Spain, somewhere warmer and sunnier (Dorina, F24, Romanian; onward migration)

- ‘If everything changes [regarding Brexit and rules to stay], then of course my future plans will be affected… we can relocate if that is the case. Perhaps that is why we are not thinking about applying for citizenship very quickly. As long as there is no change, I am not sure it is worth it. I know many Romanians who are here, they want to be legally here, but you can be legal with a residence card too. But to apply for citizenship, you first have to find out what the conditions are, if it’s worth being a British citizen after Brexit and in the future. That is probably why we are not rushing (Ana F37 Romanian; ‘wait and see’ approach).
Thank you!

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