

A project to understand *Brexit*, with therapy included

“When you're in therapy after something traumatic happens to you, you are supposed to try to understand it so that you can overcome it. That is what it is for me. I have tried to understand it so that I can overcome it. Part of the project is to understand Brexit.” says *Steve Garner*, Senior Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University, UK.

Centre on Global Migration (CGM), Migration and Ethnicity Research Gothenburg University (MERGU) and the Department of Sociology and Work Science organized together a seminar on Brexit at the University of Gothenburg, March 2020. In this seminar Steve Garner presented his current project: **“Four frames for (mis)understanding Brexit: three red herrings and a white whale”** which was well appreciated by the audience from different fields of studies, and followed by very interesting discussions afterwards. We conducted a short interview with Steve Garner to get a deeper insight into his research puzzle, contributions, challenges, and the future of his interesting work on Brexit.

Q1: Thank you Steve for travelling to Gothenburg and presenting your ongoing work on Brexit. What are the main questions in your research on Brexit?

- The question is how we explain first of all the vote to leave EU. Secondly how we explain the discourse around Brexit since the vote. How did we arrive at the point where majority voted leave? How can we analyze the discourse that followed the referendum vote? I'm trying to link this to work that I've already done, because I have a background in critical race studies, class, nation and such and it fits completely within my range of expertise.

There are lots of explanations: some of the explanations are partially true, but lots of them

are also absent and/or they neglect important areas that you can talk about. And they're not usually brought together as one set of explanations. In fact, no one has successfully yet brought together a full set of explanations for Brexit.



Steve Garner presenting his research on Brexit at the University of Gothenburg.

Like many people that live in the UK I voted remain. I felt very involved in the discourse and I've been unable to think objectively in any way about this. It is only now in January-February of this year that I can actually start to write about it.

Q2: What does your research on Brexit contribute to?

- It helps the audiences to understand one of the most significant events in British history since World War II, in terms of its ramifications. It's also a very polarizing and divisive period politically, for Britain. And in order to improve that situation and depolarize and overcome some of the divisions you have to understand what people are divided about. Often the thing which triggers the division is not necessarily the thing which has caused a division in the first place. So there are long term causes and short term triggers. And I think Brexit has a number of long-term divisions underpinning it, and the trigger was this referendum.

I think you have to look at Brexit not only in terms of how it impacts on Europe and UK in lots of areas, but also how it impacts on people within the UK and the way they see each other and **the various kinds of identities** that people construct for themselves. So it is an effort to try to understand quite complicated sense of social relationships and how they are transformed by this very significant political event that has ramifications that we don't even understand yet because we still are in it at the moment. And the research is an effort to try to draw some conclusions that help us identify

the causes of division and actually work to overcome some of these things.

It is a period also when the classic left-right division of politics in UK is very polarized as well, and with the current government having a very large majority, the opposition needs to be able to work effectively to represent all the other people in the UK. And for that you have to be able to analyze and propose solutions. Therefore it's not just a one-sided conversation. Some people would be very happy with that one-sided conversation. I'm not! And I think **a healthy democracy needs a very strong opposition to make democracy work properly**, and it's only as strong as its leadership, and the questions it asks. So I would like to contribute to this process of rehabilitating the opposition because it hasn't been very effective in the last few years

Q3: What challenges have you been confronting in your research?

- The challenge of trying to understand Brexit is that it has got so many causes and we have to be able to understand what they are and see all the connections and/or disconnections between them. And we are very close to that event (Brexit). It is usually easier to understand something a long time after it has happened. And here it's still happening. It is a challenge to make articulate and useful social science based on events which are still unfolding. On the other hand, part of my argument is also based on research that's already been completed. Because part of my argument is that the ideas behind Brexit have been in existence for quite a long time, and I have empirical examples to help underpin that case.

Another challenge is trying to present complicated ideas, together, without distorting the story that you are trying to tell and that's really hard. You saw at the end of the lecture people had lots of suggestions for other things that should be included or amended. That is perfectly normal: it's always hard to include everything and prioritise things in terms of how important they are to the story.

Q4: What are your next steps and future research plans?

- At the moment I'm still in the early stage; I'm trying to figure out how to make that research question work because it is so big. I have to narrow it down with more specific sub-questions. What I envisage is a set of papers each one improving on or providing a better explanation than the previous one.

People were so generous with their comments and feedback and I have now got lots of things to think about to help improve this piece of work. **This process of getting feedback from your peers is really important**, and here I am right at the beginning of a long period of research.



Research seminar on Brexit organized by CGM, MERGU and SOCAV.

On the other hand, I've had lots of other projects about identity, nation, class, race, etc. I'm doing one with *Gabriella Elgenius*, Associate Professor of Sociology at GU. We are applying for funding for a study on port cities such as Gothenburg and Liverpool, in terms of identities of employment and identities with the city, and how social class, nation and race work in those identities as well. I'm writing another article with *Gabriella* about how Polish and English people negotiate nationality and entitlement in the UK. And how hierarchy works in terms of who gets to be entitled and why other people are not seen as entitled to access resources. So that's on the way as well. They all revolve around the same topics. Class, race, nation and the intersecting points of those.

Q5: Is there anything you would like to add?

- Sweden is an interesting place to work from in relation to this question. There are some distinguishing features about Sweden that makes it an interesting place to think about Brexit. And there is also a successful right populist political party here that says quite a lot of the same things as the “Leave” campaign said in the UK. And there is kind of overlap with some of the discourses that I’ve described about Brexit.

Sweden is also an interesting case because it is famous for having a very strong welfare system, and maybe the decline that we have experienced in the UK is not really feasible in Sweden, because Swedish welfare system is stronger, and it hasn’t been compromised so much as the one in the UK has. I thinking about “Austerity” (which is the project of cutting public spending drastically since 2010), I’m not sure whether you could successfully be able to do that in Sweden. I’m not sure that there would be enough support to do that, so it is an interesting thing to reflect on.

The degree to which a country has provision for the more vulnerable people in the society has an impact on how coherent a country feels. It’s clear that Britain feels very divided at the moment, and one of the contributory factors to that, in my opinion, is the way that the successive governments have cut public spending and reduced public services in the last 10 years.

Thank you Steve for your time to answer my questions! It was a pleasure to meet you and listen to your very interesting lecture.

*Interview and photographs:
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