



Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast

Episode 14: ABOUT THE BRITISH IN BERLIN

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About the episode

In this episode, Michaela talks with PhD researcher Melanie Neumann about her research with Britons living in Berlin. She delves into the real lives behind the headlines, highlighting how the stereotypes of this population as young, fun-seeking, mobile workers do disservice to the high number of these who work in local businesses. Melanie also highlights their attitudes towards Brexit and the future of their lives in Berlin, their political engagements and actions in the city.

Melanie Neumann is a PhD researcher in British Studies at Humboldt University. You can read more about this interesting research on our blog:

<https://brexitbritsabroad.com/2017/07/31/disappointed-but-confident-britsinberlin-after-brexit/>

You can download this episode of the podcast at <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep014-about-the-british-in-berlin>.

Transcript

MB Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. My name's Dr Michaela Benson. In today's episode I'm going to be in conversation with Melanie Newman. Melanie is a PhD candidate in British Studies at the University of Humboldt. The focus of her research has been on British and Irish migrant populations living in Berlin. She specifically looks at their decision to migrate, the lives that they lead in the city, and their impact on the city. She's written an excellent blog for us about her experiences of doing research with British people living in the city at the time of the EU referendum and its immediate aftermath, and you can read that on our website www.brexitbritsabroad.com. Today we're going to focus a little bit on dispelling some of those myths that have been circulating about British people in Berlin, and you can find out more in a few minutes. But before I hand over to Melanie to talk about British people in Berlin and Brexit, I thought I'd just bring you up to date with a little bit of news from the project. The project's been running since the beginning of June, this is our 14th podcast, but at the same time the project's about so much more than the

podcasts. In the last five months I have been in France, both in the Lot and in Toulouse, for something in the region of two months. I've been there talking with British people who've made these parts of France their home. I've spoken to somewhere in the region of a hundred people, that's probably a conservative estimate. Karen's also been in Spain speaking with British people who've made Spain their homes about what Brexit means to and for them. And we have been astonished by the extent to which people are prepared to engage with the project and by the diversity of the stories that we're being told about how Brexit impacts on their lives. Catherine and Chantelle have been working really really hard on the citizens' panel and we're really excited that we've now got 150 people, over 150 people in fact, signed up to take part in this element of the project. And for those of you who don't know about this particular aspect of the research, this is an ongoing element of the research and the panel will be called upon at regular intervals to comment on various different things that we think are coming up through Brexit, and this month for example we've been running a myth-busters focus where we've been asking people to report to us the misconceptions that they have been faced with about British people living in the EU 27 and we're planning to make a podcast special over the Christmas period that talks to some of those myths and tries to bust them. As the project's progressed it's become really really clear that one of our key messages that Karen and I have always been very very keen to promote is about the diversity of the British population who live in the EU 27. All too often we think that particular populations become over-represented, so for example I'm sure that all of you are very very familiar with the image of British pensioners living in the south of Spain. We now know that pensioners actually only account for about 21% of British people living in the EU 27 and we're really keen as Brexit continues to unfold, as the negotiations around citizens' rights continue, that the full diversity of that population are represented with full consideration of the likely differential impacts of Brexit for the things that support the lives of these people. So we'll be working really really hard in the new year on communicating further around the diversity of that population and in thinking about the different rights and different legislations that support the lives that these people lead. So what have we got coming up then apart from that? We're going to be carrying on doing research in France and Spain, Catherine and Chantelle will be continuing their excellent work on the citizens' panel, and communicating around the issues relating to British people living in the EU 27 and Brexit over the coming months. Anyway, I'll hand over to my discussion with Melanie now. Thank you to everyone for listening, it's really great to know that you're all out there and please do get in touch with us if there are things that you think that you would like us to cover on the show. Anyway, over to Melanie now, to talk about British people in Berlin and Brexit.

MB I wondered Melanie if you might like to start by describing your PhD research to us.

MN Yes, I'm basically looking at recent British and Irish migration to Berlin, so Irish and British migrants that have come to Berlin between 2006 and 2016 and who still live in Berlin now, and I basically want to find out why they've come to Berlin, what they're doing here, and if and how they contribute to the city in an economical, cultural and political sense.

MB So tell us a little bit about how you've been approaching that topic.

MN Well I've moved to Berlin in 2010 and over the years I started that the British and Irish presence in Berlin was growing and then I had a look at the numbers and I realised that indeed it was, and then for example the British in 2016 there were around 15,000 Brits living in Berlin and there has been an 80% increase since 2000, and even though there is about as many Brits as Spanish people in Berlin I realised that there wasn't really any research on the British in Berlin but quite a lot on the Spanish in Berlin.

MB That's really interesting, what might explain that rise in British people moving to Berlin? There've been quite a lot of articles in the British newspapers about particularly young people who work in the creative industries moving to Berlin because of its cheap way of life and its fun kind of entertainment, culture and all of these types of things so d'you think that's a fair representation?

MN Well actually there is loads of stereotypes in Berlin about the British are, English native speakers in Berlin in general as well and usually the picture that you get is that the Brits are just sitting in cafes all day working on some sort of project and partying all night kind of driving up the rents and living in their own expat bubble without really having any contact to the German speakers in Berlin.

MB I can see Emma's nodding her head, she recognises that particular representation but I know through talking to you previously that this might be a little bit of an exaggeration.

MN Yes exactly. Like in my research I actually found out that, well it's not really the opposite but it's slightly different, for example I've asked the British in my survey how much they're working and it turned out that actually on average the British in Berlin work 7½ hours per day during the week which is about the same as the Germans and then also looking at the occupations that they have in Berlin. Actually about 40% of them work in the professional occupations and an additional 14 even works in managerial directorial and senior official positions.

MB So what kind of jobs are those, what kind of jobs are you talking about?

MN Well for example engineers, doctors, journalists, quite a lot of freelancers as well especially in translation, and then of course there is also some people working in the start-up industries especially in IT but also in sales and customer care positions so it's far more mixed than many people often think.

MB And I suppose, quite interested, I hadn't quite realised that the focus of the research was also on what they contribute to the city, because I think that part of that representation, part of that stereotype about British people in Germany, is about how they're pushing up the cost of property in some of those areas that are being gentrified? Which is a very particular type of evaluation of what they are doing to the city, so I wondered if you had a little bit more that you wanted to say about where you see these British people contributing to the city.

MN Yes well I asked them if they feel that they contributed to the city and about 30% say that they feel that they contribute economically for example, well some of them said just by paying tax which of course is a contribution, but then others also because they were for example founding their own company in Berlin and also 30% said that they were contributing culturally for example by being musicians in Berlin or actors, and then also 16% said that they were contributing politically for example by being members of a party or taking part or even organising political marches or political events in Berlin.

MB So like on a municipal level type of politics.

MN Yes exactly.

MB So what do you think it is that's brought this 15,000 strong population to Berlin?

MN I think part of the reason is kind of these articles and these stereotypes that you were talking about, about life in Berlin, and I do think that like many of the British that come to Berlin, especially the younger ones without a family, do of course come to Berlin for the lifestyle and the freedom and maybe also the partying and the fun, and the many of them also in my interviews often referred to Berlin as some kind of Neverland where you don't have to grow up, and this was part of what drives them to Berlin, but then of course once they're here they still need a job and they still need to pay their rent, and I think they also come to Berlin because it's just that it's easier in Berlin to afford this kind of lifestyle, so you can afford to work less but that doesn't equal just partying it's more about being able to do both, working and earning money, but also enjoying life and experimenting and finding out what one really wants in life and maybe even growing up a bit later for example, and I spoke to one respondent in my interviews and he's a freelance radio producer and broadcaster, and he for example, even though he's working in radio production in Berlin he's still able to do music and write poetry and hold poetry readings and this is something that he wouldn't have had the time or the energy for in London for example so I think there's this better life work balance and this better quality of life is what brings most Brits to Berlin and this is also what they said in the questionnaire.

MB That's really interesting, I suppose in a way it kind of confirms some of the things that we think about Berlin I suppose would be the way to put it. Obviously while you've been doing your research the referendum has happened. And I know that at that time you were still doing research with British people in Berlin and you've written a little bit about that for us. But did you notice any kind of changes to those British populations, or did people go back or what have been the responses I suppose?

MN Well I guess in terms of going back I think most of them were quite happy that they were in Berlin and they felt that it was better for them to be in Berlin and now also to stay in Berlin especially the ones that had kids, thought that for their kids it would be much better to stay in Berlin. And in terms of if anything has changed in the British population in Berlin, I think since Brexit they've become much more visible, like they organise quite a lot of events around Brexit but also other political events for example

there is going to be an event organised by the British in Berlin soon in which they inform the other Brits about the election that is going on in Germany at the moment and what the election means and what the possible outcomes are and what that would mean for the Brits in Berlin for example. So I think they've become much more visible and I think that also maybe the Berlin Senate has become much more interested in them for example especially in terms of enticing them to stay in Berlin as a kind of source of skilled workers that have come into Berlin.

MB So what, when you say, you know, the senate's become much more interested in them, what indicates that to you, what's the signs that they're turning to reassure their British population for example?

MN Well many Brits that I have talked to told me that they feel that there is a fast tracking of British citizenship applications in Berlin for example, they've said that they've spoken to other Brits that live for example in Bavaria and that there the applications for German citizenship would take much longer to be processed than in Berlin.

MB So they're processed on a municipal level those applications.

MN Yes exactly.

MB And are you seeing in your conversations with these British people, are you seeing an increased number of them applying for citizenship, was this something that you'd discussed with them before the referendum or not?

MN No I haven't really discussed it with them before the referendum but I'm talking to them after the referendum quite a lot that they would have never considered applying for German citizenship but now they do and they will apply and especially if they apply now they can still have dual citizenship like they can keep their British one and still have the German one, if they do it before Brexit actually happens so the ones that are eligible for German citizenship already just try to do it as soon as possible so they at least can have the dual one and don't have to decide for one which might be hard for quite a lot of them.

MB I think what's really really interesting about your PhD is also this comparison with the Irish in Berlin. I suppose it'd be interesting to hear from you whether you think that there are noticeable similarities or differences between those two populations. I mean obviously Brexit is a kind of spectre that haunts the British who live in Berlin but beyond that their kind of everyday lives are there similarities in the constitution of that population, of the Irish population and the British population? Is it similarly diverse? Has it risen in the same way since I think you said since 2000? Is that true of the Irish population too?

MN Yes actually they're quite similar in most of the points, although there is only about 3,000 Irish living in Berlin but yet the migration is on a constant rise as well and it has also risen by around 80% since 2000. One that I thought was really interesting and surprising like one of the main differences was that the Irish seem to be more

peripatetic like only 37% of the Irish in my sample that live in Berlin now have come to Berlin directly from Ireland but most of them have lived somewhere else before coming to Berlin, and for the British 86% of them have come directly from Britain, without having lived anywhere else before, which I thought was really interesting.

MB That's quite unusual as well I would have thought for a British migrant population, I'm not sure on the actual statistics but I would have thought that was quite unusual, that's a very high percentage of people who've never lived outside of the UK to be moving to Berlin.

MN Yes I mean I have to say that there, I had only 150 responses in my questionnaire so I'm not --- percentage if it is for like the whole population in Berlin but at least for my sample that are the numbers.

MB What do you think is the most surprising thing that people might like to know about British people who live in Berlin?

MN Well I think the most surprising facts were the ones that we already talked about, that actually this kind of myth about the British in Berlin as not really true but that they work like most of them work in the higher end of the occupation spectrum so to say, and also what I found really interesting as well was that actually around 50% of them said that they had at least basic German before coming to Berlin, and then also quite a lot of them said that they use German over 90% of their daily encounters which is also surprising because in Berlin most people think that the British in Berlin actually don't really speak German and I know some people have been living in Berlin for like seven years and don't speak a word of German but it seems that still like most of them try to make an effort and actually try to learn as much German as possible.

MB Is that also related to the fact that they're having to work in a German labour force?

MN Yes, but most of them said that they work through English so they wouldn't have to know German that well to find them work in Berlin but I guess that just very special about Berlin that in most companies here their working language would be English especially in the start-ups.

MB And did they explain to you how they had learned German?

MN Yes, actually quite a few of the people I talked to in my interviews they have studied German so they would know German from like university, but then the ones who didn't know German before coming here they started taking some courses then here in Berlin or tried talking German with their German friends for example.

MB Because I think that that's another one of the myths about British populations who live abroad is precisely that they don't speak the languages of the countries that they live in and we see this recycled over and over again as a kind of representation. It's interesting to hear that in this case that that's perhaps not true, obviously as you said there may be some people within the population who don't have those language

abilities but others are really either making an effort or are there using their German in their daily lives.

MN Yes especially now when they want to apply for a German citizenship they need to show that they have a certain level of German so some of the people I've talked to also underlined that they're now trying to become more fluent in German in order to be able to apply for German citizenship now after Brexit.

MB And that German citizenship is to enable them to stay in Berlin or are they explaining it in other terms?

MN No for most of them it's to be able to stay in Berlin yes, and then also of course to be able to move around EU, but mainly to stay in Berlin and to be sure to keep their job and these kind of things in Berlin.

MB OK that's great, thank you very much Melanie.

MN Thank you very much.

MB Thank you for listening to the Brexit Brits abroad podcast. If you've enjoyed what we've been talking about today and want to find out more, check out our website, www.brexitbritsabroad.com, or you can follow us on social media via Twitter @brexpatseu and on Facebook. And don't forget to subscribe to our podcasts on iTunes. And I'll speak to you again soon.