

Mobility and rootedness in times of Brexit: The case of the British in Berlin

Research report

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In the spring semester 2019, in the frame of a seminar on 'Qualitative methods for the study of urban diversity', the student and her teacher Dr. Christine Barwick, conducted a study on British migrants in Berlin. The study was inspired by both research on intra-European mobility and Europeanization (e.g. Dubucs et al. 2016; Fligstein 2009; Kuhn 2015; Recchi et al. 2019), as well as research on local belonging of the middle classes (e.g. Andreotti, Le Galès, and Fuentes 2015; Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2005; Tissot 2015). Regarding the former topic, our aim was to analyze the effects of the Brexit referendum on British migrants' future mobility plans and their identifications as British and European. Regarding local practices and feelings of attachment to the neighborhood, we wanted to extend current studies that are often based on the native (upper) middle classes, to skilled migrants. We want to contribute to the discussion about whether or not mobile middle classes engage in the city and develop feelings of attachment.

We conducted interviews with almost 50 British migrants, who have been living in Berlin for at least a year. The interviews covered five topics: professional trajectory, residential trajectory and neighborhood use, personal networks, and values and attitudes. The latter also included questions about Brexit – an event that clearly influences British migrants' future mobility plans as well as their national and European identifications. Our youngest respondent was 21, the oldest 73 years old, but most were between 25 and 45. About two thirds of respondents have been living in Berlin for 2-7 years, the rest has been living in the city for longer, up to 25 years. Almost all respondents were employed or self-employed, in a variety of sectors. In our sample are a strategy consultant, several musicians, a choreographer, a CEO, special education and language teachers, translators, a midwife, or a recruiter, just to name a few.

In the following, we present some of our research findings.

Research Findings

- **Reasons for migration to Berlin:** Our British respondents migrated to Berlin due to a mix of three reasons: professional, lifestyle, and family. In contrast to other global cities in Europe such as London or Paris, Berlin's economic performance is rather low. Germany's banking sector is located in Frankfurt, the media industry is strong in Munich and Hamburg- Nevertheless, Berlin has become a magnet for people working in the creative industries as well as for start-ups. Our British respondents who came for professional reasons confirm this as they are primarily (self-)employed in the creative industries (music, theater, graphic design). Various respondents also moved to Berlin due to its lifestyle. Particularly in contrast to London, the city is appreciated as affordable, liberal with a very good work-life balance. Lastly, various British migrants moved to Berlin to join their German partner whom they often had met during their studies in the UK or during an Erasmus year in Germany

- **(Dis-)Advantages of living in Berlin:** All respondents are highly satisfied with their life in Berlin and only few have plans of moving elsewhere in the near future. What is particularly appreciated about Berlin are its cultural offers, the liberal way of life, its multiculturalism and diversity, the many green spaces, public transportation, and its good connection to other cities in Europe (including London). Those respondents with children also appreciate the many offers available for them. What is viewed more critically confirms to typical stereotypes about Berlin: it is dirty and Berliners can be a bit rough. Regarding the latter, however, a few respondents also comment that Berlin and its residents have become more international and more welcoming.
- **City and neighborhood use:** Most respondents clearly identify with the city of Berlin and often also with their neighborhood. As lifestyle often played an important role in the migration decision, it is no surprise that our respondents use the city a lot and identify with it. The neighborhood plays an important role as well, particularly the inner-city trendy neighborhoods such as Neukölln, Kreuzberg, Mitte or Friedrichshain. They are highly valued for their diversity, cultural and culinary offers and the British migrants use the local offers. Many also have become good friends with other people living in Berlin, Germans as well as people from other countries. While most respondents do not have much contact with their neighbors, they still exchange small favors such as taking packages, and they describe the neighborly relations as warm and friendly.
- **Mobility plans in the wake of Brexit:** For most respondents, the outcome of the Brexit referendum was shocking. Many of them have lived in other places before coming to Berlin, they appreciate the freedom of movement in the EU. For most British migrants we interviewed, Brexit increased the wish to stay in Berlin and it made a return to the UK less likely, at least in the near future. The respondents who have been living in Berlin for more than seven years and were hence eligible for getting the German citizenship, all went through the process of applying for citizenship. Having the German and hence European citizenship ensures that they can stay in Berlin for as long as they want, and they keep their right to freedom of movement. For those not yet eligible for citizenship, the situation was more unclear. Most registered with the Berlin Senate to get a permanent residency. However, at the time of the interviews, it was still unclear what the conditions would be to get residency, whether for example if one needed to be employed or have a certain income.
- **Local, national and European identification(s):** After Brexit, our respondents felt shocked, frustrated and embarrassed to be British. Almost all respondents had the feeling that something has happened in their home country that they could not understand. Many commented on how the campaigns were based on lies and racist and xenophobic discourse that they absolutely rejected. They felt that a part of

British society has developed in a way that have not foreseen and cannot understand. They also feel that the people who voted for leave do not share their own experiences of having lived in different European countries. Hence, most respondents feel 'less British'. In contrast, their identification as European has strongly increased. At the same time, some also strongly identify with Berlin, and sometimes also with their neighborhood. Thus, their national belonging decreased, while sub- or supra-national belongings increased.

As British national living overseas for more than 15 years, you lose your voting rights. As several of our respondents have been living in Berlin for more than 15 years, they were not allowed to vote in the Brexit referendum. They felt particularly frustrated as the decision has a major income on them but they were not able to influence the outcome of the vote.

Bibliography (Excerpt)

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I like that it is big enough that there are lots of different things to do but small enough so you can travel across town. You can see people easily. And also I like there is a lot of green spaces, you're in the middle of the city but you're in a park. There is more interesting things to see and I guess it's very international as well.. to explore new things. I really like that about Berlin.

Esme, 24 years

Sometimes I think people are looking like they were made out of concrete. But then on the other hand people seem to be quite relaxed, quite non-judgemental, quite like ehm refreshingly frank at the same time. And I really enjoy that.

Jenny, 42 years

[Brexit was] certainly a shock, for more than the result. Yeah it was very... a strange feeling, and quite new... yeah I can't put it into words. (...) it wasn't something I would have expected. I thought there might be something like a common sense and it kind of what I feel what is common sense and it didn't. Yeah it affected by from that point of what the world is and the UK and what our values are.

Steven, 30 years

I feel like totally ashamed of Britain, I feel like (pause), I feel like I have to apologize when someone asks me where I'm from.

Laura, 35 years

CB: Did you vote in the Brexit referendum?

Harry: I wasn't allowed to. Again, Jesus. Have you heard of the Boston Tea Party?

CB: Hmm.

H: When the American colonialists revolted and they threw the tea in the harbour, their slogan was 'no taxation without representation'. My income now, I live mainly on my pensions to avoid putting too much pressure on the costs of (the broadcasting station), and I pay tax on those in the UK, but I'm being denied the vote because I have been living outside the UK for more than 15 years.

Harry, 73 years

It increased my feeling of Europeaness. Ehm... Because, I guess, (pause) it brings much more to mind what the EU means, like what it stands for. I mean, I always... it's probably hard to expect that I voted leave if I'm gonna stay here, I voted remain in that election. But certainly, like, just... my frustrations around Brexit also add to my like... this is what I value about being European, becomes stronger as well.

Prince, 27 years