



BREXIT BRITS ABROAD

Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast

Episode 52: About the British in Berlin and Brexit

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About the episode

In this episode, Michaela is joined on the line by [Christine Barwick](#) (Centre Marc Bloch, Humboldt University) to talk about her and her students' recent research with British citizens living in Berlin. They focus in particular on how working with British citizens who live in cities opens up our understandings of who the British citizens are who live in Europe, how lifestyle interplays with other reasons for migration, and the absence of a British community. And as they discuss, Brexit has further strengthened their sense of identification with Berlin.

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

Transcript

MB Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. I'm Dr Michaela Benson, a reader in sociology at Goldsmith's University of London and the research lead for a UK in a Changing Europe funded project that's all about what Brexit means for British citizens living in the EU 27. Today we're going to go back to a topic that we've discussed before and that's Brexit and the British in Berlin, and I'm joined by Dr Christine Barwick who is a researcher at the Centre Marc Bloch which is a French German research centre affiliated with Humboldt University in Berlin, and she's an urban sociologist who specialises in skills migration, and has previously worked in Paris with British citizens and in London with French citizens, but today we're going to talk a little bit about the research that she and her students have been conducting with British citizens living in Berlin in a time of Brexit, and this builds on an earlier episode that we did, that episode was Melanie Neumann which focused on how British citizens in Berlin had responded to Brexit. So Christine, I wanted to start by asking you to dial back and talk a little bit about your research with British citizens in Paris, and I'm particularly intrigued about this because when we think about the migration of British citizens we very rarely think about British citizens who've settled in cities, so tell me a little bit more about that research.

CB So this research was a comparative research with British citizens in Paris and French citizens in London. At the time I worked at Sciences Po with Patrick Le Galès who had just co-authored a book on one rootlessness and mobility of upper middle classes and four European cities, and what he did and I was, what I was interested in is the relationship between local belonging, urban practices, and international mobility, so how do middle class skilled migrants who are very mobile, how do they actually use the city or the neighbourhood. Another focus was that we actually really look at the local integration or incorporation of skilled migrants because there is a lot of research on low skilled migrants and how they integrate into the city, but not so much on skilled migrants. So that's what I was interested in, and so yes we did this comparative study looking at urban practices, how the British identified with Paris and also how and where the networks are located.

MB Really this work is about how the people that you spoke to related to the places that they lived and worked, which I think is a really important focus for research in this area. When did you do that research?

CB That research I did in 2016.

MB So was that before the referendum or after the referendum?

CB Well it was before, so perhaps it didn't play any role yet.

MB Were people talking about it at all?

CB No, it really did not come at all in the interviews.

MB That's really really interesting, knowing that at that stage we were gearing up for the referendum and I think that that might also help to kind of make sense of some of the shock and indignation that you reported with the British people that you worked with in Berlin for example. Maybe we should move over to talk about the British in Berlin a little. It's really interesting because this is actually a city where there's been very little research done about British citizens. There was some research in the early 2000s I think is probably when that work came out, that was really part of a movement within the social sciences to look at the European Union and to look at European integration, so you find a little bit of work about British citizens who had moved to places like Berlin, who've moved to places like Paris, to Amsterdam, as part of a more general discussion of the transnational mobility of Europeans made possible by Maastricht, but I don't think that that really did some of the work that you're so interested in, which is exactly that discussion of how those people relate to place. There's an interesting point of departure for talking about questions of European identities but not so much those kind of localised belongings. But what I thought was really interesting about that work, because I just had, briefly reviewed it yesterday which is why I'm talking about it so extensively, is that they identify a shift in what was bringing people to Berlin, so while originally in the 1960s, the 1970s and 1980s, British and other European citizens might have been moving to Berlin to work in kind of manufacturing, kind of classic labour migration, suddenly in the 1990s you get this shift towards more cultural and lifestyle based migrations. I think that's really fascinating and I assume that that is actually caught up with the history of the city in some way. Did you have any thoughts about that?

CB Yes, so first of all let me maybe say that what I find interesting about Berlin in contrast to Paris and London, as like typical as a global cities in Europe or the main cities of migration, is that in Germany we have a different let's say system of cities, so Berlin is the capital city but it's not the economic capital of Germany. So the banking sector is in Frankfurt, the media sector is very strong in Munich and Hamburg and that's also where a lot of British migrants are, and so Berlin in 2003 the then mayor of Berlin said Berlin is uber sexy, and I think, I mean this has been more than ten years ago this quote, but it's really something that Berliners still like to, well to think about themselves and of the city, so Berlin is poor but it's really this sexy city so that already it shows that, yes if we think about migration it's less about economic opportunities but more about lifestyle. But I also want to say that this has changed a lot, so Berlin actually did catch up a little bit in comparison to other German cities, and what's very strong is for example the start-up scene and also the creative sector, but is of course economic sectors where there is a lot of freelance work or fixed term contracts so it's not like in the banking sector and it's the people who come to Berlin and work in these sectors, they are still looking for particular lifestyle, like freedom and Berlin is very affordable, even though rents are rising but if you compare it to Paris, London, even to Munich or Hamburg, yes the city is affordable, rents are still affordable so there're a lot of opportunities.

MB I think you've drawn out a few really important points there, you've highlighted that when we start to look at the populations who've moved, that it's important to think about what the labour market looks like in that specific location, so the fact that Berlin is this city that the mayor called sexy and has got a particular type of economy that's structured around those kind of creative and cultural industries, necessarily means that it's attractive to people who want to work in those industries, but of course we wouldn't want to get too deterministic about that so at the same time those people then also feed into the development of those labour markets, into the development of those structures and services, so I think that's a really really important point. So the British people that you've been working with in Berlin, I mean they're a small sample taken from the wider population, so what do we actually know about British citizens who live in Berlin in general at the moment?

CB Well --- data doesn't tell us very much about British citizens so what we know for Germany is that they are highly qualified, so I think only Austrian migrants are on average more highly qualified than the British.

MB What does that mean, is that in terms of their degree level, what's the ...

CB Degree level yes exactly. And they are also, the British migrants are higher qualified than the German average. They also have a higher income than the average German so that already shows who the British migrants are in terms of skills. The majority is in working age, so anywhere between 20 and 60. For Berlin unfortunately there is not so much data, what we know is that the majority of British migrants they live in the inner city, so in the central neighbourhoods, and what I assume compared with the British migrants in other German cities, is that they are a bit younger on average and that they are highly qualified in terms of degree but that their income might be less than for British migrants in Frankfurt or Munich for example. So in our sample also we have many young people, so under 35, who have been living in Berlin for about 4 or 5 years but also we have about one third in the sample they are over 35, they often have children and they have also lived in Berlin much longer so 15, 20 years.

MB What you're really highlighting is the diversity of that population in terms of their age but also in terms of their family circumstances, and I also know that one of the things that has been discovered through those incredibly rare and sparse statistics about British citizens who live in the EU is that there are high levels of intermarriage between British citizens and German citizens, which of course also shapes that population in particular ways.

CB Yes, and that's also one of the reasons for the migration to Germany or to Berlin, because if we look at the reasons, it was mostly for lifestyle, also for professional opportunities, or even to professionally slow down which is also interesting, but then of course for family reasons, so that the British citizen has a German partner and they decided to move to Berlin together.

MB Really, what you're highlighting is how complex the motivations are behind migration in these cases, it's not simply an economic migration or a lifestyle migration, if you wanted to distinguish between those three.

CB Yes exactly, and I think that distinguishes Berlin from other places like London where for example the French citizens I interviewed, they mostly went there for professional reasons. And this has an also effect, yes on how the city is used and viewed, because if you come for lifestyle reasons or for personal reasons you have more networks and it gives you another feeling for the city and also more rootedness in a sense.

MB So that feeling of being settled is what you mean by this rootedness.

CB Yes, exactly, so that the city is actually also used and people don't just stay in their little let's say bubble in just one place and only mingle with other British migrants, so their use of the city in many different facets is much more widespread.

MB I think this is the really important point that you're drawing out, and I know that you have come to it through your observations of the comparison between British citizens living in Paris and Berlin against the French population that you spoke to in London, but this idea that, okay so we might bound our research around the idea of doing research with British people who live in a particular place, but we also know that British people have a very diverse range of practices, just like any nationality actually, any migrant population, that might mean that actually they're not just hanging around with their British mates, and I thought that this was a really interesting point that you drew out in the report that you've written about British citizens in Berlin, which was that actually there's no group I suppose, no British community as we might call it.

CB That's true, and this is true for Paris and also for Berlin that there are no British interviewed in Berlin we also asked them for example do you go to particular British places and they all went no no, we don't, so there's maybe there is a British bookshop or there was one British shop that closed where they had typically British food for example, and that's a place where they used to go, but these were really the only ones and we also asked them about networks. They said they really tried to avoid making contact with too many other British citizens because they wanted to get to know locals, which is not easy, some said it was really hard, but yet they did their best and there's for example some interesting research by (Essiori Rudici?? 14.35) on Italian migrants in Paris and he finds that the longer they lived in Paris the more integrated they get into the Italian community. And this was not true for British migrants. So they really, they don't develop into a British community. Of course it happens that they do hire

some British friends but most friends in Berlin are true Germans or to people from another nationality.

MB I think that's really fascinating and it kind of helps me with something that I have been struggling with in terms of thinking about doing research with British citizens in Europe at this point in time, which is that it's very easy for us to go to those go-to communities where British citizens congregate, but that might mean that we're missing quite a large part of the picture and that's the reason why I moved my research from a rural area where I've been doing a lot of research for a long time, to a city, to Toulouse, and interestingly it wasn't the well-known British community in Toulouse that's built up around Airbus for example, that were the people that came forward, it was these individuals who just found out about the research through various memes or who I contacted, because I'd noticed that they were there and they were doing something, and I think that changes the entire flavour of what we know. But that point too about, that you make about Essiori Rudici's work and how over time actually these people might embed themselves more in these ethnic communities, is also interesting, particularly in respect to Brexit because what I have seen is Brexit being this moment where British citizens who may never have spoken to another British citizen in the city that they live for years and years except, you know, just in passing, suddenly find that actually there's something that they can get from being involved in those networks and I'm sure that when we come on to talking about British citizens in Berlin in a time of Brexit that's also something that you might want to reflect on.

CB Yes. It's very interesting what you're saying because we did ask about Brexit, but the narratives were very similar but they actually did not say anything that would lead us to think that they are no more involved in the British community. It's very interesting that the common narrative about Brexit was really that they were ashamed, frustrated, embarrassed, these British citizens obviously they have profited a lot from Europe so they were for remain, yes so all of them told us that for them it was much more difficult to identify as British, and as an effect they said that they identify much more with Europe but also with Berlin, or sometimes put London.

MB **So what about Britain and Germany, where are those in those narratives?**

CB It's very interesting to me that the nation state doesn't play a very important role for identification. So obviously I did ask about identification as British, the British citizens said that this was very difficult for them and so it didn't really play an important role. What is really much more important are cities and regions such as Europe and for some even the world.

MB **I think that that is a really really important point in thinking about belonging, that we think what scales of belonging people are claiming, and what those then do for them. I just want to backtrack a bit because I realise that although we've talked about British people in Germany and British people in Berlin, what isn't clear yet is who are the people that you spoke to in Berlin?**

CB The people we spoke to were very diverse in all kinds of respect. So I would say about two thirds of the sample were younger than 35, they had lived in Berlin for at least one year but most of them between 2 and 5 years or actually longer than 15 years, and in terms of their educational and professional background almost all of them had some, had a bachelors or masters degree, and the professional background was also very diverse so we talked to teachers, to translators, many people were in the creative

industries, music business, theatre, performance, we had strategy consultants, a CEO, a midwife, a recruiter, so very diverse, and also in terms of place of living, many lived in the innercity neighbourhoods like Kreuzberg, Nikuhn, but some of them and mostly with children they also lived in the outskirts of Berlin.

MB That's really helpful because I think it really helps people to understand a little bit more about who the people are that are affected by Brexit and how to contextualise their responses to that. How would you say that Brexit has impacted on their relationship to Berlin?

CB What I found very interesting is actually also because we just talked about the diversity of the sample, that the feelings about Brexit and also the effects for example on the relationship with Berlin, were almost the same across the sample, and I would have thought that maybe age plays a role, place of residence in Berlin might play a role, but for all of them it really strengthened their relation to Berlin, their feeling that Berlin is the place where they feel comfortable, where they actually want to stay, almost none of the people we interviewed had any plans to move back to the UK or to move to another place in the near future. So Berlin is really the place where they want to stay and that they can relate to.

MB What do they think Berlin is?

CB Well Berlin is first of all multicultural, very diverse, it has many cultural offers, great nightlife, great food, it is affordable, and most important I think is the sense of freedom. So really this freedom to do what you want, in terms of jobs you can try things, you can fail you can try again, but then also freedom, even in the sense of what you wear and then due to all the cultural offers the freedom to do whatever you want. You want to go to the theatre one evening, go out dancing another evening and there's always something you can find to do.

MB So they really told this story about Berlin as a cultural space, a space where they can lead particular types of lives.

CB Yes. I think that's very important. What I mentioned previously and what I found really interesting is, so on the one hand Berlin is a place where people also had professional opportunities, because compared to other German cities a British citizen said that there are more jobs for English speakers, or people who don't speak German very well, on the other hand Berlin is also this place where you can slow down professionally so people who have worked a lot maybe in London for example where they said they worked and worked and then they went home and slept, and in Berlin they have the opportunity to still work but to also enjoy life, because here you don't have to earn that much to be able to lead a good life, it's really these days where you can also, where you can slow down and enjoy life. I think that's a very important narrative.

MB I think it's a really important narrative in terms of demonstrating how people can pursue professional opportunities, but pursuing professional opportunities that permit them also some kind of lifestyle advantages, I think, I mean this is how I would think about it, being a kind of a lifestyle migration scholar it definitely to me really does highlight the importance of not just focusing on the fact that people moved for work, they moved for work in a particular type of environment that would permit them to do other things as well, if indeed that is what they did. So that's really really valuable in that respect. One of the other themes that I know that you have explored through the work with your students with these

British citizens living in Berlin is these ideas about what it means to be British and what it means to be European at this point in time, and I wondered what really stood out for you there.

CB Yes, I also I recently went back to the interviews to look at this more closely and I think what is interesting is that what is British is basically defined at the moment a negative force, so they say that the xenophobic and racist campaign is not British, it's not how they feel what it means to be British. Also these narratives for example that they feel English but they don't want to have this narrative of the Great Britain or they say they identify with London but not the rest of the UK, so it's more in these negative terms that they talk about Britishness, and Europeanness is said more positively, even though it is also difficult to put into words what it actually is. So I think for the respondents, what is European is mostly this freedom of movement that they have used, and they also talk about shared standards, shared identities, also that it is easy to settle in any European city which they think might be more difficult outside Europe, so yes it's some idea of a shared value system maybe even though as I said it's hard to really pinpoint it.

MB And shared city environment, which I think is also interesting that you could exchange one city for another, and I wonder how restricted that is for example to western Europe.

CB That's an interesting question, and I think it is my view western European view. The people we interviewed actually had visited different places but they have not lived in many other places before, partly also because they are relatively young and so Berlin was basically the first place where they have lived outside the UK for a long time.

MB Did you have a sense of this Europeanness as having its own distinct content through their accounts, I mean were you able to populate that idea of Europeanness or was it just that it was being mobilised as a way of saying this is what Britishness is not, or this is what this version of Britishness that Brexit revealed is not.

CB Yes. It's very important for them to say or to show that they are not this kind of, well what we hear a lot about the, they don't belong to the British who vote for leave, which means of course that they highly value the European Union and Europe, but at the same time we also asked them about what territorial levels are actually important for them to identify, and then Europe remains important but it's really the city, it's much more important and that's of course much easier also to define, what is the city, what is it about the city. So I would say European identity is more against Britishness, but then like really what is more pressed for is the city.

MB So they're claiming urban identities essentially.

CB Yes. So Berlin is very important and partly also London.

MB That's really really fascinating, because I think that scale can get missed out when we are focused on questions of national belonging, of supernational belonging and identity. I think that's been really fascinating Christine, thank you very much for sharing the work that you and your students have been doing, I'm sure that people are going to find this really interesting.

CB Yes, thank you.

MB You've been listening to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast, hosted by me, Dr Michaela Benson, and produced by Emma Houlton at art of podcast. The series is part of a UK in a Changing Europe funded research project, Brexit Brits Abroad, that's all about what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU 27. We're really keen to hear from you about the issues and concerns we address in the programme, so please do get in touch with any thoughts, queries and questions. You can find our contact details on our web page [brexitbritsabroad](http://brexitbritsabroad.com), or get in touch via social media, we're on Twitter @brexpatseu and we have a Facebook page Brexitbritsabroad. Finally, in case you're not already subscribed to the podcast, you can do so on both iTunes and Google podcasts. Thank you for listening, and I'll be back in a couple of weeks with the next episode.