

RÜDIGER GÖRNER, *Brexismus* oder: Verortungsversuche im Dazwischen. Mit einem Gespräch über das historische Exil von Rüdiger Görner mit Jeremy Adler und Michael Krüger, hrsg. und mit einem Nachwort versehen von GÜNTER BLAMBERGER (= Beiträge zur neueren Literaturgeschichte; Band 379), Heidelberg (Universitätsverlag Winter) 2018, 129 S.

Nichts ist in unserer Zeit der multiplen Verflochtenheiten illusionärer als der Glaube an eine unanfechtbare nationalstaatliche Souveränität.  
(RÜDIGER GÖRNER, *Brexismus*, p. 76)

Over twenty years ago my colleague Gisela Holfter and myself founded the Centre for Irish-German Studies at the University of Limerick. Ever since the Centre for Anglo-German Cultural Relations at Queen Mary University of London appeared on the academic scene in 2005, we have regarded with envy the vibrant development of our counterpart in the UK under the inspired directorship of Professor Rüdiger Görner. It is an extraordinary twist of history that since the fateful Brexit decision of 23 June 2016 the successful CAGCR appears destined to operate in a political environment that may drift away from both Germany and the European Union and may even be hostile to its work while the activities of our own Centre, unexpectedly, have been catapulted into the mainstream in Ireland, as is explicit in the Government's strategy paper ›Ireland and Germany: A wider and deeper footprint‹ of April 2018. This document not only places Irish-German relations in the forefront of Irish foreign and EU policy, it also allocates a key role to culture in Ireland's future (post-Brexit?) relationship with Germany. Of course, this says nothing about the importance of the work of either centre in the future: in fact, it can easily be argued that the work of the CAGCR will be needed even more now than ever before.

›Brexismus‹ is a collection of five, mostly previously published, essays or interview transcripts, with a preface and an epilogue by the author. It also contains the transcript of a discussion between Görner, Michael Krüger and Jeremy Adler about German exiles in wartime Britain<sup>1)</sup>, recorded at the University of Cologne on 7 November 2016. Blamberger provides a brief Postscript. I might be forgiven for focussing specifically on the Brexit-related articles here. The volume aims to explain Brexit and its background to a German readership. Görner has been a resident in the UK for close to four decades and the book combines the insider with the outsider perspective. The book is exceptionally well informed and offers a good insight into German perspectives on Brexit. Görner is in fact a very sought after speaker in German Brexit debates and his views matter; some articles in this volume have already reached wider audiences in their first iterations as newspaper

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<sup>1)</sup> My co-director Gisela Holfter has written extensively on German-speaking refugees in Ireland, most recently in GISELA HOLFTER, HORST DICKEL, *An Irish Sanctuary: German-speaking Refugees in Ireland 1933–194*, Berlin/Boston 2017.

articles, radio broadcasts and academic conference papers. The author is also an excellent stylist and pairs his puns and wit in the most effective way, in a manner we associate with the best British essayists. This of course can only be savoured by readers of the German language.

The book appeared in early 2018 and describes the state of the Brexit debate at the end of 2017. Dates matter in this context as the intervening months have amply demonstrated; events can develop very quickly indeed in the context of Brexit. By the time this review appears Britain may very well have changed its mind again and have decided that all things considered the country may after all be better off within the EU. But whatever happens, Görner's analyses will not have been superseded. In fact, the reader is perhaps particularly struck by the lack of movement on the issues discussed in the book since then: the contradictions and inconsistencies outlined by Görner have in fact only become more obvious and have congealed into an intractable political stalemate that makes it difficult to see a resolution. Much has got worse. The "Politclownerien" (31) the author describes have become only more spectacular, reaching new heights when a Scottish MP, in an act worthy of Fritz Teufel's ›Spaßguerilla‹, stole the ceremonial mace in the House of Commons Chamber to delay a vote, broadcast to the incredulous amusement of millions of citizens in the rest of the EU brought up with a sense of admiration for the parliamentary traditions of the motherland of representative democracy. The Irish Backstop, only hinted at in Görner's book, has since become a key issue of the Withdrawal Agreement of November 2018 – and *the* stumbling block for its passage through the House of Commons, inevitably and entirely predictable to everyone in Europe bar the British Brexiteers. Establishing new borders and no borders simultaneously is no easy task! The Brexiteers' nightmare of the 'Norwegian solution' becoming rule takers rather than a rule makers (101) has, equally predictably, effectively come to pass, though British have so far refused to accept this least bad outcome of the Brexit decision formulated in the Agreement.

The book is written "cum ira et studio", as Görner himself puts it (10). Much anger and frustration speaks out of all essays about the "barbarisation of political culture" in Britain (9). Görner does not hold back about the "British high treason against the European idea" (13) and "the bizarre delusion in Britain, and especially England, of returning to the old glory of the British Empire" (11). He has researched the consequences of acquiescence and appeasement in the face of the Nazi aggression long enough to know what intellectuals failing to speak out in times of crisis, or to speak out too late, can lead to: "Nein, es ist genug. Wer jetzt nicht Tacheles redet über die verhängnisvollen Auswirkungen des Brexit-Referendums, wer jetzt nicht Farbe bekennt, müsste seine Selbstachtung verlieren" (10). The inclusion of the interview with Adler and Krüger further underpins the lessons of the National Socialist era.

Coming from someone who has devoted his academic life to furthering understanding between Germany and Britain, Görner's *Radikalkritik* will hardly

surprise us but can also be understood as the bitterness of a disappointed lover: Görner deplores the loss of much that he admires about Britain, “das englische Understatement, das verhalten Vornehme, das Ethos des Kompromisses, das in der Redensart ‘we agree to differ’ einen so vorbildlich sinnfälligen Ausdruck gefunden hatte” (75). He deplores the “Selbstdemontage einer ganzen politischen Kultur, die einmal vorbildlich war” (10). This culture includes tolerance and compassion and expressed itself also in British openness towards German refugees during the Nazi era: no doubt the interview with Adler and Krüger was specifically added to remind German readers “that it was not always so”.

Given the author’s background, the collection unsurprisingly has a cultural focus; it concerns itself with the cultural consequences or potential collateral damage of Brexit and explores their (often mentality-historical) backgrounds (15). This seems to me a vital contribution to the Brexit debate which all too often, in Ireland almost exclusively<sup>2)</sup>, has been dominated by economic, political and legal considerations, in Britain all bundled together in the vacuous slogan of “taking back control”. In Britain itself, of course, the cultural dimension is essential for an understanding of Brexit: the multi-layered culturally-embedded issue of immigration was after all central to the debate.<sup>3)</sup>

Görner’s outrage at the denial of the European links in Britain, and the European dimension in British history is palpable because it is so obviously false. His anger is expressed in the strongest form in his immediate response only days after the referendum of 23 June 2016 and published here as “Ketzerische Sonntagsgedanken zum EU-Referendum in Britannien”, based on an original broadcast written for the *Hessischer Rundfunk*. Görner castigates British ignorance about the EU which left it open to the lies perpetrated during the campaign, especially by the “Lügenbarone der britischen Politik” (35) Boris Johnson und Nigel Farage (though one might think this a little unfair to good-natured poor old Baron Münchhausen). The regional diversity in Britain and the different outcomes in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the City of London may yet force Britain to acknowledge and deal with its “most profound identity crisis since the end of World War II” (20). The idea of “sovereignty in this digital age of total interconnectedness“ (22) is for Görner not only an outmoded concept but the most perfidious and at the same time naïve aspect of this whole campaign (22); what is required is: “To accept mutual dependencies and reinforce them by further developing viable political community

<sup>2)</sup> I have taken a similar approach from an Irish perspective, on a much more modest scale, in my contribution to the Irish national broadcaster’s *Brainstorm* website: <<https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2017/1123/922301-life-after-brexite/>> [26.06.2019].

<sup>3)</sup> The cultural perspective has also been adopted by the Irish critic Fintan O’Toole in his ascerbic psychopathology of the English, ›Heroic Failure‹ which has placed the Brexit debate into a broader framework of an English mentality shaped by the country’s colonial past. Using English writers as his key sources, he augments the “fear of the other” of Brexit by a more general “fear to be exposed”. (FINTAN O’TOOLE, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain*, London 2018).

structures and rendering them fruitful for the common good” (23). This is precisely the opposite of the Brexiteers’ *Weltanschauung*.

The absence of the European dimension in the Brexit debate is further explored in “Kontinentalsperre. Brexit oder: Die Begehung des Scherbenhaufens”. No Europeans were invited to discussions about Brexit (28), the discussion was all about Britain and Europe never featured in British self-definitions (25). The complete lack of consideration of the EU as the most successful peace project within Europe expressed itself also in the commemorations of the battle of the Somme on 1 July 2016, a few days after the referendum (21). Görner deplors that the UK never fully participated in the Union and failed to develop the EU institutions towards an “umfassende Parlamentarisierung der europäischen Entscheidungsprozesse” (31), the multiple opt-outs by British governments paving the way for the eventual Brexit vote (37). Görner laments the depoliticization of the school curriculum and the disappearance of the subject of Politics under Margaret Thatcher which contributed to the widespread ignorance about the EU. For him the absence of political education is a key deficit of contemporary British culture (32). (He expands on the topic in an interview with Barbara Klimke entitled “Der Brexit ist Ausdruck eines eklatanten Mangels an politischer Bildung” which also forms part of the book.) He also has critical things to say about the discipline of Political Science at university level which he regards as too timid, unwilling or unable to explain the concept of ‘shared sovereignty’ (32). The overall result was a widespread relapse into the rhetoric and practice of purely national interest politics (33). This subsequently expressed itself in Britain’s naïve attempts in the immediate aftermath of the referendum to revive the antiquated strategy of bilateralism in its foreign policy (38), of which the other EU member states quickly disabused British negotiators, causing the collapse of their strategy (if there ever was one) like a house of cards. Görner puts Brexit also in a wider European context with populist neo-nationalism raising its head everywhere as a late consequence of globalization. He critically adds that Germany in particular too long felt safe in its conviction that after 1989 we had arrived in a post-national age (37). The article first appeared in 2016 in that most ambitious and intellectually brilliant European quarterly *›lettre internationale‹*, published in four language editions, albeit, tellingly, never in English.

“‘Tragischer Transport’? oder: Verortungsversuche im Dazwischen. Überlegungen zur Person des Kulturvermittlers”, first published in October 2016, is a plea for the work of the CAGCR. Görner places his own position on a historical continuum, digging deep into his knowledge of Anglo-German cultural relations. He sees himself as a successor to Alfred Kerr, Stephen Spender, Ernst Robert Curtius and Sebastian Haffner. His historical overview over key mediators between Germany and Britain up to the 1930s is bookended by Constantin Geisweiler with his *›German Museum‹*, published in 1800, and Harry Graf Kessler, the son of a German-Irish couple. Somewhat despondently and disillusioned he concludes: “In the space of the in-between it can already be booked as a success if the attempt, the venture to embark on cultural mediation, is even noticed” (54), an attitude

shaped perhaps by the inability of the CAGCR to substantially influence the pre-Brexit intellectual climate.

In “Illusionspolitik: Der Brexit als Offenbarungseid des ‘Systems Whitehall?’” Görner blames the “System Whitehall” of successive British governments for the Brexit crisis, especially the xenophobic tendencies born out of an absence of a European perspective. This also resulted in a shortage of experts on European matters which became so blatantly obvious in the negotiations and is making the set up of alternative legal and regulative arrangements in a short space of time a virtually impossible task. In the Brexit debate Europe was falsely blamed for the outcomes of the “System Whitehall” which is responsible for the ever-increasing centralization in London and the death of municipal England (72). Consequently, the voters feel disenfranchised, they fear they have no chance in the new globalized environment and no longer feel represented by any political party. Görner supplies many details of the financial benefits Britain has reaped from the EU. Culture and education being the areas closest to his heart, he fears the disaster looming for third level research where British universities have been spectacularly successful in EU competitions, not to mention doubts about the continuation of the ERASMUS programme. He blames the strong influence of government on the third level sector (71) for both the decline of European Studies and of Modern Languages which contributed to the ill-informed pre-Brexit climate. Görner also highlights the lesser known fact that the EU’s culture funding for London dwarfed that of the Arts Council (71). Little wonder that London’s mayor Sadiq Khan whom the author regards as a bright light campaigned tirelessly against Brexit (79).

The concluding essay “Brexismus: Über eine postimperiale und neonationale Vermessenheit, nebst einem musikpsychologischen Exkurs” is an original work for this volume on the role of music, landscape and other arts in the creation of British national identity and the utterly unreflected complexity of trying to marry notions of both England and Britain with the concept of the nation. Here Görner shows his way with words. Parallel to *Rachitis* which Germans also call “die englische Krankheit” he coins the term “Brexitis”, a condition closer to an illness than a state of mind, “mehr eine [...] kollektiv exzentrische Geste als ein wirklicher Ismus” (90).

A few concluding remarks on Görner’s important book: The focus on culture and literature in the context of Brexit unavoidably shapes the perspective, the German-British focus is always in danger of losing sight of the bigger picture. Görner himself is aware of this and mentions the trend both in Europe and the US towards a renationalization for which we may look for an explanation not only in the “System Whitehall” but in post-1989 globalization. It may very well be true that the ‘European’ dimension was actually not so central to the British decision at all, as Görner says himself: many did not even understand that the decision actually meant “raus aus der EU” (69). That the EU bought so readily into the underlying ideology of neoliberalism (strongly encouraged by the UK) was what drove the ever increasing income disparities in all EU countries. In this sense the EU also bears a share of the responsibility for the present crisis, though lessons seem to have been

learned post-Brexit. Moreover, among those left behind by globalization anger may have expressed itself in the same way as in Britain, had, in 2016, other countries adopted the same ill-advised strategy of running a referendum. It is also worth remembering that the referendum result was an accident which was not supposed to happen and could easily have gone the other way, e. g. if a higher percentage of young people had bothered to vote. We should never lose sight of the fact that close to half of British voters did not agree with the proposition.

In his “Offener Epilog” written in January 2018 Görner perhaps overshoots his admirable aims somewhat by declaring closer co-operation between Britain and the EU in the area of culture and academia, i. e. via the universities, as the ‘only’ way to counteract the consequences of Brexit (100). Nevertheless, the book’s message that education is central to an understanding of what happened and the key to a better future can hardly be disputed. In this context universities have a hugely important role to play. Görner sees the promotion of constructive bilateralities in a multi-lateral context (104) as the noble task of cultural mediators such as *Germanisten*. Perhaps *Germanistik* abroad has done too little of this in the past and it remains to be seen whether the subject following the example of the Goethe Institute is prepared to regard itself more seriously as part of European Studies rather than simply as an exploration of the German-speaking countries’ national identities and cultural specificities. Much can be gained, both politically and culturally, from a Europeanization of German, French, Hispanic, Slavonic Studies etc., i. e. from these philologies devoting themselves not just to the teaching of national cultures and their languages but to the broader, and ultimately more important, task of educating European citizens. To Görner himself such a Europeanization project post-referendum appears understandably a ‘utopia’ in present-day Britain, albeit, he hopes in a Blochian sense, a ‘concrete utopia’ (104). The author occasionally includes Ireland in his mentality-historical reflections on ‘the British Isles’ (84), a highly problematic denotation in Ireland, in the context of Brexit all the more so. From the perspective of the neighbouring isle the book, like the whole Brexit debacle, implicitly confirms to its readers and to all Europeans who may for the first time have been forced to expend more serious thought on the complexity of mentalities in this part of the EU: Ireland is after all not Britain, *au contraire* as Beckett put it.