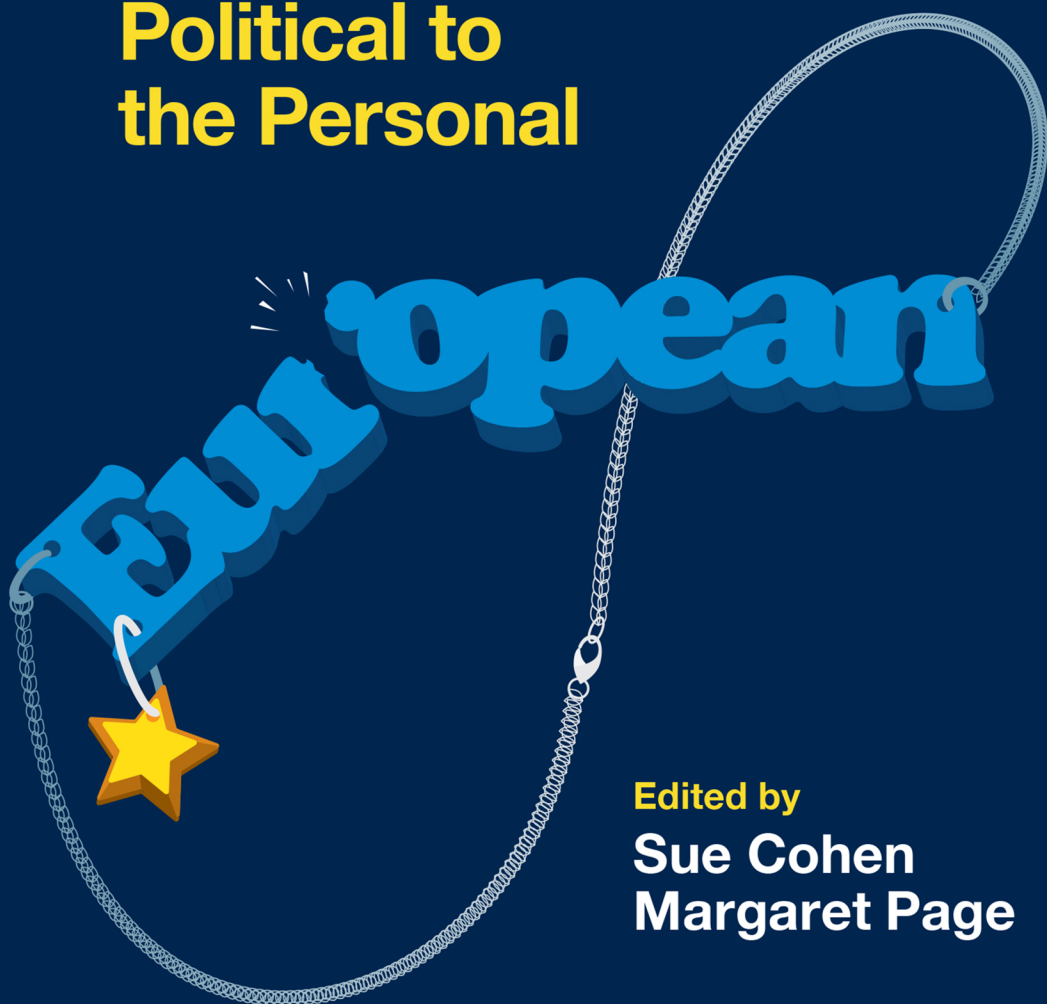


Feminist Activists on Brexit

From the
Political to
the Personal



Edited by
Sue Cohen
Margaret Page

Feminist Activists on Brexit

Endorsements

Too many of our voices as women, and indeed women of colour, were not heard in the EU referendum campaign and its aftermath. Thank goodness then for this book as it goes some way to redress this. Whilst on occasion painful to read for those of us on the losing side, it also offered warmth, optimism and inspiration. A real roller coaster of emotions revisiting the highs and lows of the period through the collection of writers who generously shared their stories, often intimately and uniquely. I came away with optimism in the power of women, the importance of standing together, united by our commonalities and taking comfort in our diversity. Crucial reading not just for those of us still left reeling and bruised by Brexit, or those interested in a feminist perspective of a significant historical event, but also more widely: if we keep sidelining the impact of political decisions on women, we can hardly be surprised when the political solutions of those in power fail to deliver for so many of us.

Leandra Box, Race Equality Foundation

A highly needed and very original contribution to our understanding of intersectional feminist, women's and migrant struggles against Brexit in the UK. *Feminist Activists on Brexit: From the Political to the Personal* scrutinizes how nationalist, radical conservative and right-wing populist forces have been othering women in private, family and community life, activism, labour market, and public sphere at large. It effectively contests those destructive forces and develops transformative visions of feminist political agenda, community organizing, and democracy. The book stands out because it integrates exceptionally well knowledge from researchers, activists, community organizers, and writers that rely on diverse approaches, from interviews, autobiographies to feminist theoretical analysis and poetry, written in a style made accessible to academics and wider public. I recommend this book to everyone, who wants to understand Brexit and its complexities.

Dr Kateřina Vrábliková, University of Bath

Feminist Activists on Brexit: From the Political to the Personal is unique in bringing together the experiences and reflections of feminist activists and academics to bear on the single most monumental constitutional change in contemporary British politics – Britain's departure from the European Union, or Brexit. With careful precision, the book interrogates the impact of Brexit on women's lives, and on feminist collective action. With passion, it explores the daily gendered, racialised and intersectional 'othering' of Brexit even as the negotiations in high political forums deploy a gender-neutral discourse. Through the lens of Brexit, and latterly Covid-19, this compelling book redefines for our times the 1970s feminist insight 'the personal is political'. *Feminist Activists* is a call to action, a roadmap for emancipatory politics. The book is an invitation to feminists and progressive networks to re-engage with democratic institutions, challenge misogynistic and

racist political cultures, and shape a genuinely inclusive, participatory democracy. *Feminist Activists* is quite simply an essential read for anyone who cares about democratic politics in Britain today.

Professor Yvonne Galligan, Technological University Dublin

Essential reading for scholars and activists – for everyone who cares about our leaving of Europe, this is a book about the agony and jeopardy of Brexit.

Resounding throughout this vivid and impressive collection of stories from across the four nations of the UK, it also forms an important record both of the significant, rich and diverse experiences of women's solidarity and of achievements over decades of the European project of equality and anti-discrimination.

Grassroots activists, academics, trade unionists and community leaders write with immediacy, urgency and gravitas as they describe – in one case in haiku – what women had and what will be lost to Brexit. These remarkable women continue to actively defend the rights of women, migrants and refugees throughout Europe, for example through the Single Parent Action Network, a social movement of 'rooted cosmopolitanism', linking the domestic with the international, the political and the personal, the Women's Budget Group and a raft of feminist and diversity networks and organisations.

The women are at once and severally, British, and yet no longer 'really' so, as sisters with origins as far as Somalia and as near as the Netherlands discovered in the new post-referendum hostile environment of racism and othering. Examples of the often toxic masculinity of Westminster politics, Brexit's threat to the Northern Ireland Peace Treaty, contradictions between the sometimes gender sidelining of Scottish nationalism and its promise for female emancipation, together with a rising backlash against equality and feminism in Wales give us important detailed insights into how it was in the EU and how it is today for women in all four corners of the United Kingdom.

Their book is an important record of remembrance of the successes of the European era and women's part in these, but also of the rage, sorrow and despair as a populist, nationalistic patriarchal Brexit erodes women's rights, tries to silence voices and dismantle women's solidarity and community.

And yet it is too a call to re-group, mobilise and fight on; even more so as 'the storm unleashed by Covid 19' is valorising women's roles as carers, health workers, in community and home informs the setting of new agendas to 'build back better'.

Dr Sue Ledwith, The Global Labour University

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Feminist Activists on Brexit: From the Political to the Personal

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the feminist activists and colleagues who participated with us in EU funded partnerships and projects to promote women's intersectional equality. These experiences of working together, across differences of context and political stance, have inspired and made this book possible. In particular we thank The Flashmob in Bristol who encouraged us to write this book, and the friends and family members who supported us in this endeavour.

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Preface

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Writing and reading about Brexit tends to be a depressing experience. For those coming from a history of social activism and/or critical scholarship, the focus is almost exclusively on recounting what is lost. Brexit inculcates a climate of despair and pessimism. For those who have struggled for change, mounted protests, won some battles and transformed the very language of public life, we are now faced with a climate in which our actions are limited to defending small remnants of a more expansive politics. A range of voices have documented the dismantling of institutional and legal safeguards, the reversal of hard-won political achievements, the exacerbation of social divisions and the likely economic costs, especially for those in marginal or low paid work.

This book challenges the absence of women's voices in the Brexit debate, exploring the likely impact of Brexit not only on the laws and institutions that had enshrined some measure of equality but also on contemporary language and culture. In this way, the volume offers a critical vocabulary for understanding – and working against the grain of – the contemporary political culture of the UK and beyond. It shows how the sharing of activist experiences can itself be an act of resistance, forging solidarities across diverse political voices. This matters in a climate where feminist politics has been residualised and characterised as 'yesterday's agenda'. On the contrary, there is an urgent need to draw on feminist thinking to explore the many different ways in which Brexit affects women's lives.

Brexit marks an unfolding set of legislative changes that are eroding the rights of women, migrants and other groups, and undoing the institutions that inscribed the equality gains of the last half century. It is dismantling the regulatory frameworks that protect citizens from exploitation and other harms whether as workers, consumers or carers. Its impact on the economy is likely to be severe; the profound economic shock that follows will have harsh consequences for marginal and fractional workers, opening up opportunities for greater exploitation at the point at which safeguards are being dismantled. It is impoverishing whole neighbourhoods and regions as businesses close or decide to relocate. And the public sector and wider public domain are already being starved of resources as government pursues its project of shrinking the state and dismantling institutions.

Brexit has also heralded a profoundly gendered and racialised reconfiguration of the cultural landscape. At the same time that (some) women were brought to

voice by the #Me Too movement, climate change activism and other international struggles, so women were being silenced by the political culture that enabled, and is exacerbated by, Brexit. This double silencing is significant. High profile women (demonised as ‘Remoaners’) were assaulted, maligned, abused and, in the case of Jo Cox, murdered, by those working for Leave campaigns. This was a highly public form of silencing, engendering anger but sometimes leading to defensiveness and retreat as political commitments were weighed against personal risk. But Brexit also enables the silencing of women through the proliferation of domestic violence and homophobic and racist assaults in homes and on the street. These processes of silencing are not universal: the success of the Leave campaigns depended on the support of many women. But Brexit seems to have closed many of the spaces used by those seeking to work for progressive, transformational change. And it has delegitimised political discourses inspired by feminism.

To understand the ways in which these different dimensions of change are dynamically intertwined – and compound each other – it is helpful to re-engage with the feminist slogan that ‘the personal is political’. This phrase of the 1970s brought issues previously assumed to be a matter of private life – care, relationships, domestic violence – into the public domain, making them the focus of policymaking and political discourse. Over time, the phrase has also been used to engage with issues of identity and belonging. While sometimes tending towards processes of individualization, the understanding of the personal as political has brought matters of feeling and attachment into the political lexicon.

As this volume shows, Brexit has profound implications for questions of culture, identity and belonging. It erodes already fragile solidarities across differences of nationality, class, and generation. It undermines the notion that England, Scotland and Northern Ireland form a United Kingdom. It stokes a politics of ‘othering’, demonizing not only migrants and ‘foreigners’ but also judges, economists, intellectuals and experts, not to mention the BBC. And it stokes new divisions, within workplaces, neighbourhoods and families. Such divisions are painful and deeply personal.

It follows that struggles over culture and language matter as much, perhaps, as the struggles to defend the rights hard fought for by generations of women. But struggles over culture and language and struggles to defend – or even enlarge – equality and rights are inextricably linked and are brought together to good effect in this volume. The work of the women described here resonates with my own earlier research on feminist inspired activism in the UK in the second half of the 20th century¹. I coined the term ‘spaces of power’ to denote the contradictory experiences of women who tangled with governmental logics (policy discourses, legislative enactments, institutional reform programmes) and who drew on government/local government /EU funding in order to pursue transformational political change. The changes sought by women activists (community-based action, democratic innovation, more participative leadership, the coproduction

¹Newman, Janet (2012) *Working the Spaces of Power; activism, neoliberalism and gendered labour*. London, Bloomsbury.

of social policies, gender mainstreaming) may have been appropriated as governments sought to enable neoliberal rationalities to permeate the social landscape. These spaces of power were by no means benign, but nor were they necessarily the site of incorporation.

The women activists' accounts that are captured in this volume show how they used the governmental spaces constituted by the policies and institutions of the EU, and explore their experiences – and losses – associated with the changes wrought by Brexit. The austerity policies of the 21st century, and the anti-feminist climate associated with the rise of populist politics across Europe and beyond, has closed many of the spaces of power women had found productive of change. The rupturing of transnational networks, coupled by the withdrawal of EU funding, is having damaging consequences. They were generative of new forms of solidarity and prefigured new political movements – on climate change, environmental protection, open borders – many of which became enshrined in European laws and institutions.

Of course, the EU is not a benign entity or a comfortable space; rather it is a site of contradictory political projects and contested imaginaries. It is an agent for the expansion and enforcement of neoliberal agendas yet is also a space in which equality and human rights agendas have flourished. It has imposed austerity measures on some member states, but has also offered resources, institutions, connections and political spaces that offer the possibility of pursuing progressive agendas. Questions now surround the survival of such spaces as Brexit and its aftermath threaten the coherence and resilience of this 'social' Europe. Within the UK, the decade of austerity saw the closure of many feminist-inspired projects that had benefited from EU funding and support. And Brexit is a profoundly anti-feminist phenomenon, driven by the rise of populist political forces that seek to erode democratic participation and to foster the demonisation of women activists and politicians, as well as judges, courts, experts and the state itself. It fosters a political culture characterised by hardened divisions and the legitimisation of misogynistic and racist abuse.

For me, the re-assertion of activist voices represented in this volume offers a measure of hope in a dire political landscape. Currently the Brexit agenda has been displaced from the headlines by the Coronavirus pandemic. Paradoxically this has opened up new platforms on which gender politics are being played out. The pandemic has expanded and made more visible women's work in communities, forging neighbourhood networks of support, working in food banks, delivering essential supplies to those who cannot get out, and offering on-line or telephone support to overcome the social isolation of vulnerable households. We are translating the gendered norms of care and responsibility to this new world, dusting off sewing machines to produce PPE, face masks and other necessities to overcome the deficiencies of government in meeting needs. We form a large part of the flood of volunteers supplementing the work of professionals in the context of governmental failures. And our work is attempting to ameliorate some of the harms produced by the eruption of the virus – notably, but not only, domestic abuse – in a social world already eviscerated by the ravages of austerity and the cultural divisions of Brexit.

We are once again the brokers and intermediaries of a changing social landscape. It is women who are, in the main, managing the constraints and restrictions of lockdown. It is largely the labour of women that has generated more expansive vocabularies of care that transcend – and connect – domestic, neighbourhood and institutional settings. And we are witnessing a new visibility of highly gendered occupations – nursing, care work, teaching, shop work and personal service industries. Public support for women working in such low paid, and now highly dangerous, occupations has been highly visible, not least in weekly clapping ceremonies. It is possible that such support will offer a measure of protection in government decisions about who is to bear the cost of the recession to come. However, I remain sceptical about the possible outcomes of this future in the absence of a politics explicitly informed by feminism – a politics that might redress the silencings produced by Brexit and the wider climate of populist politics.