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'How Did it Come to This?' An anthropological perspective on Brexit, Euroscepticism and the rise of 'angry politics'

When the history books about Brexit are written one of the key questions asked will be '*how did this happen?*' How did the UK – once renowned for stable governments, pragmatism, diplomacy, and over four decades in which EU membership had become the cornerstone of domestic and foreign policy – descend into such chaos and produce an outcome seemingly so harmful to its own economic interests and international standing? In this lecture I explore events surrounding the referendum and its outcome. Conventional explanations highlight internal struggles within the Conservative Party, failures of the 'Vote Remain' campaign and weaknesses of the UK's 'winner-takes-all' electoral system. Yet other factors were also important, including decades of neoliberal policies, growing mistrust in government, fears about immigration, the rise of populism and neo-nationalism and increasing media hostility towards the EU and the liberal establishment. These elements produced a 'perfect storm' of discontent for which bumper-sticker slogans like 'take back control' offered a simple and appealing solution. However, none of these factors explain the widespread Euroscepticism that underpinned the Brexit vote. In this talk I offer some anthropological reflections on Brexit and trace the roots of Britain's troubled relationship with the EU. Following Kathryn Verdery (1999), I argue that we need to examine the politics of Brexit in terms of 'enchantment' and what Maskovsky and Bjork-James (2021) call 'angry politics'. If Brexit provides an anthropological window for analysing deeper fault lines in contemporary Britain, it also highlights problems in the EU, particularly its democratic deficit and the legacy of its austerity policies.