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Negotiating Brexit: migrant spatialities and identities in a changing Europe

Introduction

The nature of the relationship between migration and the UK's vote to leave the European Union in 2016 has been extensively discussed in academic, policy and media discourse. Whilst seemingly endless debates about the precise causes of the Brexit vote are somewhat extraneous, more germane is how the plebiscite and its aftermath exposed, and widened, existing disquiet concerning the pace and scope of immigration from the European Union (EU) and further afield amongst some communities (Harris and Charlton, 2016). Alongside this, the growth of right wing nationalism and election of populist parties across Europe has mainstreamed the narrative of a European migration 'crisis'. This may reflect a broader set of crises shaping the Global north that are *political* (a crisis of legitimacy for the neoliberal state¹ and of supra-national governance through the EU and has unsettled the more cosmopolitan, globalized visions of European unity); *social* (a crisis of belonging as territorial boundaries become the subject of negotiation and inequalities deepen²); and *economic* (a global recession and aggressive austerity programmes and widening inequalities³). The response to addressing migration 'crises' in the UK has focused on limiting immigration, ending free movement and 'taking back control' of 'our' border.

Potential solutions are geographically differentiated, with some proposing an 'emergency brake' on migration for regions without effective infrastructure for migration management and increased dissent (Bernard and Fraser Butlin, 2018). While others have proposed a separate migration policy in devolved regions to counter an ageing and declining population (Kyambi, 2018; Kyambi et al. 2018). These processes have placed EU migrants as the subject of wider discourses, yet their responses to Brexit and their experiences of negotiating everyday life in this context of uncertainty and hostility have largely been discussed outside formal political/policy channels. For EU migrants, the UK government has stressed the relative ease of achieving 'settled status' for existing EU migrants (Home Office, 2018), yet there are hidden complexities that may exclude vulnerable groups (Migration Observatory, 2018). By asking 'what kind of thing' is Brexit?, Anderson and Wilson (2017) argue that a geography of Brexit should look beneath hyperbolic headlines, and instead endeavour to 'map how Brexit surfaces and becomes with everyday life and in everyday spaces'. There is a need

¹ See Jessop (2017)

² See Virdee and McGeever (2017)

³ See Dorling (2016)

then to recognise the complexities of these measures and everyday, emotional and material impacts on migrants moving through and staying in the UK.

This special issue addresses this concern through a collection of papers on the experiences and impacts of Brexit from two perspectives: EU citizens in Britain, and British citizens currently residing in Europe. The papers, first presented at a PGRG sponsored session at the 2017 RGS-IBG Annual Conference, begin from the 'event' of Brexit (cf. Anderson and Wilson, 2017) with many discussing migrant responses to the vote for Brexit ranging from initial feelings of 'shock', 'panic' and 'uncertainty', to pragmatic, adaptive strategies to build a sense of security and continuity. However, they also show that experiences of hostility and ambiguity over rights and entitlements have longer term histories and impacts on modes of belonging, meanings of home and future mobilities. The papers highlight the complex processes of negotiating Brexit from the perspectives of these two key groups, raising new lines of inquiry for understanding mobility, migration, integration, belonging and citizenship. They also foreground migrant voices and positionalities as they narrate the affective, emotional and material impacts of Brexit on everyday lives and plans for the future.

There is now a rich and nuanced body of scholarship on the identities, motivations, experiences and outcomes for intra-EU migrants (e.g. Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Boswell and Geddes, 2011; Favell, 2011; King 2002; Recchi and Favell, 2009), particularly focused on Central and Eastern European (CEE) mobilities following EU enlargement (e.g. Burrell, 2010; Eade and Valkonova, 2009; McDowell et al., 2009; McCollum et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2009; White, 2011). Furthermore, scholars have been quick to respond to the shifting parameters of Brexit geopolitics, for example with critical commentary on how Brexit has intensified already existing racial and class hierarchies between migrants and citizens in UK communities (Bhambra, 2018; Botterill, 2018; Lulle et al., 2018; Rzepnikowska, 2017; Komaromi, 2016; Virdee and McGeever, 2017). The discourse of the Leave campaign, its appeal of imperial nostalgia and representations of migration as a threat to national sovereignty, has not only influenced the wave of racist violence against migrants and ethnic minorities that followed the referendum but 'turned citizens into migrants' (Bhambra, 2018; Emujulu, 2016). Virdee and McGeever (2017:1808) note that 'what is striking about this wave of racist violence is that perpetrators made little attempt to distinguish between black and brown citizens and white European migrants', suggesting long-standing racial hierarchies were re-invoked indiscriminately, irrespective of citizenship or migration status. Brexit and the rise in xenophobic sentiments are changing rapidly how intra-European mobilities are understood, represented and lived.

The collection makes two key contributions to these debates: Firstly, the papers reveal a diverse range of perspectives and experiences of the Brexit vote, with each containing original, rigorous empirical research (quantitative and qualitative) that captures a unique phase in British and European politics. In each of the papers, Brexit is configured as a transitional moment in European politics, set within a broader context of economic, political and social transformation. The contributions look both at the immediate rupture of the 'event' and at the more embedded, historic inequalities that shape migrant experience, strategies and outcomes. Secondly, each paper makes theoretically innovative contributions to the geographies of migration, urging population geographers to re-energize concepts of mobility, belonging, home, integration, diversity and citizenship in the post-referendum landscape. This is applicable to wider, international debates on how constitutional change and political instability affect the nature and pattern of international migration and mobility. While the papers in this special issue view 'Brexit' in different ways and from different positions and scales, they overlap in two key areas:

1) Brexit is conceptualised as a relational process of continuity and discontinuity

Halfacree and Barcus (2018:14) make a convincing case for a relational population geography as a way to enrich analyses of population, space and place. They call for an 'enlarged' sense of population geography that expresses 'the historically grounded lives of populations as experienced across and through "real" spaces and places'. The papers in this collection present Brexit as a relational process and demonstrate how diverse histories and geographies of marginality and privilege shape responses to and impacts of Brexit. Many of the papers discuss the uneven effects of Brexit and the stratification of different EU migrants based on juridical status, location, labour market position, race and class. Lulle, King, Dvorakova and Szkudlarek employ Massey's (1993; 2005) concepts of power-geometry and relational space to discuss the differentiated trajectories of migrants from Latvia, Poland and Slovakia. They found key differences in the mobility options and preferences of highly skilled migrants compared with those in lower skilled occupations, highlighting the impact of Brexit uncertainty alongside personal and professional connections and disruptions. Similarly, Botterill and Hancock employ a lens of feminist geopolitics to explore Polish migrants' multi-scalar and relational attachments to place emphasising the role of emotions in framing decisions for mobility. Focusing on spatial identities and practices, they show how Polish nationals reconfigure spatial scales of belonging as both European and Polish whilst also expressing loyalty to emerging nationalisms in Scotland. Both these papers also draw out the legacy of 'East

Europeanness' as differentiated and discursively produced in new ways through Brexit. Brexit, they argue has produced new fears and anxieties among East European whose 'difference' is heightened in the context of anti-immigration sentiment. While this may reflect historical othering processes the parameters of belonging are shifting. Focusing explicitly on the hostility and hospitality experienced by EU nationals before and after the Brexit referendum in Wales, Guma and Jones show the 'ongoing' hostilities that have shaped EU nationals' sense of belonging in particular locales. They show that for some EU nationals Brexit led to a change to their interactions with others, while for others, such as Polish nationals, it reflected an ongoing and established negative questioning of their status and identity. In addition to showing variability of experience, the paper uses a Foucauldian lens to underline the power of discourse in shaping migrant experiences in Wales, related to national and devolved representations of nationhood and citizenship. Similarly, McCarthy discusses the variegated experience of Spanish nationals in the UK, comparing the perspectives of Spanish nationals born in Spain to Latin American Spaniards. Critical of scholarship on 'free' movement in the EU that constructs a 'hierarchy of desirableness', McCarthy argues that Brexit has put into sharp focus those formerly absent from the debate. On her research, McCarthy found that Latin American Spaniards were more likely to apply for permanent residency in the UK compared with Spanish nationals born in Spain. However, both groups felt that Brexit had a negative impact on work, social life and access to services, with Latin American Spaniards more negative about their precarious position at work. In shining a light on the differences between groups, the paper acknowledges relationality of Brexit impacts and migration experiences connected to legal, economic, social and cultural factors.

2) Temporality, lifecourse and belonging in Britain/Europe

The papers in this issue capture how different people from a range of backgrounds express similar emotions and share similar encounters. They also variously deal with issues of temporality. It is clear that over time migrant's perceptions of Brexit change and initial shock, anger and anxiety soften – yet in all papers the adverse effects of Brexit signal ongoing uncertainties for migrants in Britain and EU. As discussed, the event of Brexit is time-specific yet connected to broader histories and futures. Rather than focus on mobilities and the temporariness and circularity of migration, many of the papers explore longer term processes of settlement and belonging (e.g. Guma and Jones), the complexity of migrant attachment to place (Botterill and Hancock), and home-making in migrant destinations (Miller). Two papers explore the relationship between becoming and belonging, highlighting how Brexit has obstructed processes of 'becoming' at the beginning and towards the

end of the lifecourse. Tyrrell, Sime, Kelly and McMellon's paper highlights the uncomfortable and ambiguous position of young Eastern Europeans in the UK positioned in between the category of 'migrant' and 'citizen' as the Brexit process unfolds. Brexit, they argue, may cause significant and unexpected rupture in young people's lifecourses with long term effects for their future. Miller's paper explores the changing meanings of home for retired 'Brits abroad' and the limited options for return migration. For those of working age, concerns over citizen rights, entitlements, welfare and wellbeing combine to disrupt established frames of belonging and shape decisions about mobility futures. All of the papers reveal how uneven access to services, residency and citizenship rights, as well as hostile encounters, shape EU migrants' senses of belonging at different spatial scales – from the sub-national/local to the transnational/ regional. Ranta and Nencheva, for example, discuss four types of belonging that migrants negotiate after Brexit (breakaway, cosmopolitan, in-between and patriotic). They argue that Brexit has compelled migrants to re-group and re-think their sense of belonging with many affiliating towards a European, rights based conception of belonging. The meaning of a European identity is discussed in other papers too (Botterill and Hancock, Miller, Tyrrell et al.), as a performance of solidarity, a stabilizing effect to reconstitute belonging after Brexit and a mechanism of exclusion (see also Jablonowski, 2017; Trenz and Triandafyllidou 2017 on stratification of EU citizenship). In particular, with the era of 'free movement' drawing to a close, younger people for whom this is a 'rite of passage' are re-negotiating their European identities in more precarious and uncertain conditions.

This collection demonstrates theoretical rigour and empirical richness in analysing the impacts of the Brexit referendum and negotiation process on mobile subjectivities, belonging and attachments to place, raising key questions for future research on citizenship, home and mobility regimes. In particular, the concept of belonging has been reworked in various ways by authors in this issue as attachment to place and nation; as transnational homing, and as boundary drawing (see also Antonsich, Yuval Davis). Combined, the papers offer an expanded concept of belonging in post-Brexit Europe that includes both formal, legal and political inclusion as well as the informal, emotional and affective bonds and encounters in everyday life. Furthermore, the papers individually point to the diverse intersectionalities and geographies of experience between different generations of migrants and at various lifecourse stages. In addressing these core conceptual themes, these advances have the potential to shape research agendas in population geography and migration studies far beyond Brexit.

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