What does Leaving the European Union Mean? Re-visiting the Meaning of the Nation State

There are many potentially fruitful angles that geographers can, and should, explore with pupils and students, including territory, sovereignty, culture and identity, economics and trade, politics and democracy, nations and supra-nationalism, and the changing regional geography of the UK/Europe. Here, I will focus mainly on the question of the nation state and its relationship to people's sense of place. I want to suggest that Brexit provides an opportunity to re-visit and re-vamp the purposes and meaning of the nation state, and, in the process of so-doing, re-invigorate a genuinely inclusive politics for the UK.

A Vote for Meaning

'A vote for meaning over money', was how Charles Leadbeater (2016) reflected on the outcome of the referendum. As business leaders and politicians are fretting about the economic fall-out of a potential 'No Deal', it is worth remembering that the electorate voted for leaving the EU in spite of (inflated) warnings about potential economic downside of doing so. In other words, people had other values in mind when making their decision, for which they were prepared to take a hit to the economy. According to the Ashcroft exit poll, approximately half of Leavers said that the biggest single reason why they voted as they did was that 'the principle decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK' (2016). Another third said that it 'offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders' (*Ibid.*). While Leavers have been called all sorts of names for choosing the nation state over the EU the vote signifies a fundamental problem with the political narrative and direction the country has taken over recent decades, one which has excluded or 'left-behind' a large proportion of the citizenry. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the strength of feeling behind the vote has been a long time in the making (see Morgan, 2017). How did we get to this point?

While the European Economic Community dates back to 1957, the more fundamental and *political* change followed the establishment of the EU in 1992. In the past few decades we have seen a 'pooling of sovereignty' and power shifting to Brussels in tandem with political theories of neoliberalism and globalisation. As John Morgan (2017) observes in the context of Englishness, this period has given rise to significant cultural shifts associated with de-industrialisation and the erosion of working class culture. In the UK, the seeds of marketization and individualism were sowed in the 1980s under Margret Thatcher. Following the collapse of communism, subsequence UK governments have kowtowed to the narrative of neoliberal globalism and integration with the EU (Massey, 2007).

While this has been a period of increasing wealth for the UK overall, 'inequality has been growing since the early 1990s' (Massey, 2007, 98). Citing studies from the Institute for Public Policy Research, Massey describes the changing economic and regional geography of the UK in which London and the South East has grown at the expense of 'The Rest of the UK'. She highlights how government (New Labour at the time of writing) policy treated London as the 'Golden Goose' that would stimulate growth in other regions. Massey laments that this approach was largely unchallenged and that there was 'No serious account taken of the relations between regions' (*Ibid*. 105), which instead were viewed as in competition with each other. Similarly, advocacy for a 'knowledge economy' favoured individuals with higher education and skills, and those in a position to re-locate to areas offering greater job opportunities (the South East). Massey's account echoes that of Alison Wolf (2002) who describes an hour-glass employment structure – plenty of low-skilled, low-paid jobs at the base and high-skilled, high-paying jobs at the top, but a hollowing out of stable and professional jobs in the middle.

But, there is another way in which sections of society feel left-behind – their values and their voice. 'Is this the geography we want?' asks Massey (2007) Indeed, citizens were never asked if they wanted to join the EU (in 1975 the referendum was for the European Community). It is a geography (and politics) largely shaped by politicians, and business leaders, in Westminster and Brussels. As David Harvey observed, 'the neoliberal turn is in some way and to some degree associated with the restoration and reconstruction of the power of economic elites' (2005, 19). Similarly, James Heartfield (2013) describes about how national governments have outsourced or deferred difficult decisions to the EU: 'The Union is there to do the things that elected governments dare not do' (2013, 70), for example setting the Common Agricultural Policy.

The strength and influence of political and economic elites has grown in relation to the lessening of voices of the lower classes in society. The defeat of the miners' strike in 1984-85 decimated the influence of unions and the voice of the working class for more than a generation. Deference to the EU by national political leaders, other supra-national organisations or simply 'the forces of globalisation' has often been depicted as an unstoppable, almost natural process beyond the control of people. 'Metamorphosis' is the term Beck (2016) uses for in his account of a transition to a (hypothesised) more 'cosmopolitan' politics. However, as Heartfield (2013) observes, post-national politics has meant a widening gap between elites and voters.

Almost prophetically, Massey laments the 'violent geographies', noting that 'we rarely get to vote about them directly' (2007, 98). Well, through the referendum at least, people have made their different voices heard. Similarly, Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2018) suggest Brexit should be interpreted not only a formal request to leave the EU, but an attempt by citizens to address social, economic and political imbalances in the nation.

A Neglected Sense of Place

In the discussion about how people voted in the referendum, a useful distinction is provided by David Goodhart (2017) in his book *The Road to Somewhere*. Goodhart contrasts people who he labels 'Somewheres' versus people who are 'Anywheres'. Somewheres are more rooted (geographically and ideologically) in particularly places and identify through group belonging. Their values are more traditional and their views more marginalised in contemporary society. In contrast, Anywheres are more mobile and careerist. They are more achievement-orientated, more likely to attend higher education away from home and to relocate for work (in the South East or even abroad). In Goodhart's estimation, Somewheres constitute approximately half of the population, Anywheres 20-25 percent, with the remainder being in between. In the referendum, Somewheres were more likely to vote Leave and Anywheres to vote Remain.

While different researchers may well choose different terms of classification, Goodhart's analysis speaks to the Brexit divide (albeit in differing proportions) – with the country split on closer integration with the EU versus returning control to the nation state. Putting the two together we can see that the nation state still matters to the majority of UK citizens. While many individuals go along with and have done well out of the neoliberal agenda the continued significance and meaning of the nation (or nations)[1] to the demos has been overlooked in the rush to globalise and transcend borders.

Something similar could be said about academia. Cresswell (2012) notes that many geographers have followed Massey in preferencing a relational notion of place, in which, 'recognition of how the outside of place was every bit as important as the inside' (2012, 220). While all places are constructed in relation to other places outside of them, have recent geographers also neglected to view place as

something more rooted and to explore people's deeper attachment to places? Place was conceived differently in the 1970s, suggests Cresswell, when Yi-Fu Tuan and Relph called for a greater 'attention to the subjective experiences of people in a world of places' leading to a more rooted notion of place (2012, 113).

Zaki Laïdi's (1998) analysis sheds further light on the shallowness of the globalisation narrative, in which he suggests society has been characterised by a *loss of meaning*. While individuals may achieve personal fulfilment, job satisfaction and material well-being through climbing a career ladder, this has come at the expense of a deeper sense of 'foundation', 'meaning the basic principles on which a collective project depends; 'unity' meaning that 'world images' are collected into a coherent plan for the whole; and 'end' or 'final goal', meaning projection towards an elsewhere that is deemed to be better' (Laïdi 1998, 1). Or, to put it another way 'What does this place stand for?' (Massey 2007, 10). Massey poses this question in relation to the city of London, but should we not be asking this question of the UK?

Why Borders Still Matter

As David Storey notes, the modern state is dependent upon three closely entwined features: territory, sovereignty and borders (2017, 116). Borders still matter not only because they define the spatial extent of the nation state, but because they give meaning and definition to the people who live within a territory. Thierry Baudet (2012) recounts how borders define the limits and scope of a society in which live a population who share some common foundations, laws and whose fortunes are to some degree tied. This doesn't mean that we cannot choose to transcend the boundary or that the boundary must be closed, but, a boundary creates the possibility of a 'we' who share something in common and a place that 'stands for something'.

Similarly, Benedict Anderson (1983) revealed that nation states are historically the first 'Imagined Communities' where a common (imagined) bond is formed with a people, the vast majority of whom we do not know and will never meet. Yet, the national community is not imagined in the sense of being dreamt up. While folk stories, legends, symbols and flags have been manipulated for national purpose, in most cases a common identity based on cultural roots was already taking shape (at least in embryonic form). Evidence for this can been seen in English civil war (1642-51), the American War of Independence (1776), the French Revolution (1789) and the Haitian rebellion against French rule (1791).

In former colonies this usually wasn't the case as colonial powers decided national boundaries based on their spheres of influence rather than cultures and nations. Historically, nation states have been forged in a wide range of circumstances often necessitating the creation of national languages and combining of identities (for example Italy in 1861 and Indonesia in 1945). In the case of the USA, a melting-pot approach was taken, combining different cultures around a shared vision and common purpose. So, people can be bonded by a shared culture and/or by a common purpose and mission. The fact that most people go to work, pay taxes, volunteer to help others and vote for representatives demonstrates that nation states still matter to citizens.

We must also recognise the historical atrocities committed in the name of *political nationalism*, especially by European states in the New World, Africa and Asia. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the content of the nation state can either be progressive or very destructive, which is why free speech and democracy are essential to keep in check the power of the state. But, what is radical and progressive about the nation state, in the modern era, is that it spread democracy to all

members of society, a right that was claimed by women in the early part of the twentieth century and former colonies after the Second World War.

Storey (2017) makes the point that nation states should not be viewed as permanent fixtures on a map. There are other ways of organising democracy and other forms of identity. But, in the current period, the nation state is the form that democracy has taken, and hence sovereignty is dependent upon the demos (a point overlooked by Storey). In this sense, the nation state is a greater embodiment of European values than the EU, which has worked to overturn the voice of citizens every time a referendum has not gone its way (Holland in 2005, Ireland in 2008, Greece in 2015 and now Brexit).

Re-Imagining the UK

The outcome of the referendum has given the UK an opportunity to construct a more open and inclusive politics, an opportunity for a genuine debate about what the nation is for and to set a progressive domestic agenda that will begin to address the imbalances forged over recent decades. Young people will be better placed to contribute to this debate if they are equipped with knowledge about their own nation(s) - they are taught about English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish culture. This does not make the curriculum inward-looking, but rather, children will be equipped to make sense of other cultures and forge stronger connections with people of European and other nations given a deeper appreciation of their own culture and where they are from.

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[1.] In the context of Brexit, the nation I refer to is the inhabitants of the nation state of the United Kingdom, although the people of Wales, Scotland, North Ireland and England can also be viewed as their own nations.

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