Everyday Brexits

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Abstract

In this commentary, we explore how geographers might respond to the event of 'Brexit' – the decision and process of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union after the referendum of June 23, 2016. Whilst it is necessary to understand the ways in which 'Brexit' is an effect of a range of named causes and conditions, we argue that geographers should also stay with the event of 'Brexit' by following how 'Brexit' surfaces across a variety of everyday scenes and situations. Such geographies of everyday 'Brexit' would begin from the different ways in which people, groups and organisations relate to 'Brexit' through the making present of diverse futures. As futures are anticipated, hoped for, suspended or otherwise related to, 'Brexit' (re) animates relations of power, and gives rise to new forms of collective and bodily life.

Everyday Brexits

What kind of thing is Brexit?

In the days that followed the UK referendum of June 23, 2016 the verdict by a margin of 52% to 48% to leave the European Union had what Derrida (2003: 88), talking of 9/11, called the 'impression of a major event' – it appeared to both disrupt and open up possibilities. Immediately narrated as a decision to break with a long accepted, but for many only ambivalently attached to, status quo, the 'impression' of a major event was created through a turbulent mix of dramatic scenes of jubilation and devastation, joys and despairs, which punctuated more familiar moods of resignation, apathy or indifference (on which see Fisher 2009; Gilbert 2015). What very quickly became named and known as Brexit saturated everyday life in multiple, disjunctive ways; becoming as the exhilaration and joy of the return of something lost and the possibility of unspecified better futures to come ('sovereignty', 'control', 'Britishness') *and* the despair and worry of an unsettled present foreshadowed by future losses (of 'influence' or 'economic well-being', or a 'tolerant Britishness' (see, Wilson 2016)). As an act of voting quickly morphed into more or less intensely attached-to political identifications - remainers and leavers - Brexit became an occasion of dissensus and the complex enactment and reproduction of existing power relations and inequalities; intensifying, revealing and foregrounding existing divides of class, age, ethnicity, race and locality, whilst also cutting across other commonalities (for example, see Emejulu (2016) on the whiteness of Brexit). Perhaps it was felt as a 'major event' not only because something settled was overturned, not only because of the surprise of a change – even if exiting the EU had been successfully framed in the leave campaign as a simple solution to a range of contemporary ills – but because there was and is no consensus

about the UK's (post)Brexit futures. Brexit was and is encountered as promise and threat, salvation and disaster, opportunity and mischance, or simply more of the same. And perhaps it has retained the '*impression* of a major event' because, despite efforts, it has not yet been securely emplotted within a single story (after Raynor (2017) on relations between events and story). Brexit becomes through a mix of divergent, contradictory stories that animate and materialise 'remain' and 'leave' positions and identities – stories of the loss and resurgence of sovereignty, of 'too many' immigrants, of an over-powerful manipulative media, of 'taking back control' from something external, of an out-of-touch elite, of politicians that lie and offer false promises, and of people that made a mistake, were duped and will soon realise, and so on.

In this commentary, we suggest that as geographers begin to consider how we can research and write geographies of Brexit in the midst of this turmoil we might start with a simple question – what kind of thing is Brexit? Of course, Brexit is many things; the apparently accepted name for a decision that marks an event to come; a state project of disentangling and separating the United Kingdom from the European Union; a proliferating set of impacts and effects felt across multiple dimensions of life; and an end point to be desired, feared, or more ambivalently related to. As a name for an event, we do not wish to take the emergence of 'Brexit' for granted. It carries reference to other political and geographical upheavals – specifically the Eurozone crisis and the scenario of a Greek departure, when 'exit' was first popularised as a suffix ('Grexit'). Such a popularisation reflects the rise of memorable expressions for political scenarios, their prominent use by the media and their rapid entry into a common lexicon. In using 'Brexit' as a term of reference, we hold the nuances that it conceals in sight, whilst paying attention to how it circulates and takes on meaning and force in everyday life.

What further interests us here is how embryonic social science accounts treat Brexit – or rather the vote to leave the EU – as a particular kind of thing. Brexit becomes the

expression of a fragmented nation as the vote to stay or leave is correlated with various indices of social difference and position (Barnett, 2017). Brexit becomes a revolt or protest on behalf of those 'left behind' by forces of neoliberal globalisation. Brexit becomes one more case of a resurgence of populist nationalism after the financial crisis of 2008 onwards and, as such, a symptom of a European-wide 'crisis of liberalism' and identity (Douzinas, 2013; Wodak, 2013), to give but some of many explanations. In commenting on Brexit's conditions, geographers have honed in on the legacies of Empire, imperial geography and Britain's geopolitical decline, ignorance of the European Union's structure and powers (McConnell et al. 2017), and the political geographies of new and growing forms of territorial fragmentation and uneven development (Bachmann and Sidaway, 2016; Dorling, 2016; Ingram, 2017). At the same time, early analyses of electoral geographies have underscored the significance of education, income, and age to voting behaviour, whilst pointing to an 'unfairly blamed' working class, who were less crucial to the result than was widely reported (Dorling, 2016: 1).

Whilst placing Brexit within a set of wider conditions and forces is necessary and important, treating the event only as a symptom to be explained risks passing over how it happens – and continues to happen – as part of everyday life. It risks passing over the range of more or less subtle, more or less intense, changes that *are* Brexit as it surfaces across multiple ordinary scenes and situations. Brexit happens in and as: snatched conversations; intensified anti-immigrant feeling and an upsurge in racist attacks and reports; applications for dual-citizenship; worry about the price of consumer goods; strategy meetings; accusations of a betrayal by 'elites' or a High Court decision that thwarts the 'will of the people'; the staged repetition of the phrase 'Brexit means Brexit', and everything from anger to mild bemusement at the absence of a 'plan'; a sense that politicians lie and their promises aren't to be believed, and so on. If we only treat Brexit as a symptom of something else, then we miss these and the many other ways that Brexit is already happening, but in ways that

differ from the dramatic sense of event that marked the period immediately after the referendum result.

What has become clear since the referendum is that there has been a failure to understand the multiple, disjunctive ways, that the European Union (or the act of exiting) was felt as part of the UK's affective present – the multiple senses of what the contemporary condition feels like to live in. That is, there has been a failure to understand how people felt about and responded to various forms of now ordinary crisis that became, in different ways, attached to membership of the European Union and the opportunity to vote in the referendum, whether austerity, job losses, inequality, unaffordable housing, political malaise, or worsening health and educational standards (c.f. Coleman, 2016; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2017). We join Katz (2017) in underlining the need for working differently, for respecting the *feeling* of things in all of its messiness, or, to borrow from Haraway (2017), for 'staying with the trouble'. In this vein, a geography of Brexit might start by mapping how Brexit surfaces and becomes with everyday life and in everyday spaces, as it shifts from a dramatic disruption to something that touches people and becomes personal as it oscillates between the foreground and background of their lives – occasionally intensifying in moments of contestation and dissensus. In staying with Brexit as it unfolds in everyday life, we argue for a geography of Brexit that refuses to know what matters or gets to count as a 'headline issue' before analysis. Instead, in this commentary we argue for an orientation that analytically cuts across work on the economic, political and other geographies of Brexit, to consider Brexit as something that is encountered in innumerable ordinary ways to become part of what Raymond Williams (1977) called the 'particular quality' or 'sense' of a period.

Post-Brexit Futures

The geographies of everyday Brexit that we have outlined might begin with asking how people, groups and organisations relate to Brexit through the making present of diverse futures in the interval between the decision to leave, the start of the formal process of exiting, and the final date of exit. Brexit is anticipated, speculated, worried about, hoped for, feared, shrugged off, ignored, contested, imagined, illusory, mocked or entirely unfathomable. At the same time, a repeated desire for speed – to 'get on with it' – displaces something from the present and impacts the temporal experience of the event. Importantly, our interest in the making present of Brexit futures does not omit a concern with the past. The present is full of legacies – of only just held onto, almost lost, or not-yet mourned pasts that have taken on new lives. Narratives of a return to glory carry the traces of empire, displace a 'postcolonial melancholia' (Gilroy, 2005) and revive mentalities of exceptionalism (Marquand, 2016). Yet whilst Brexit futures might rehearse and redeem multiple pasts, geographies of everyday Brexit might also consider how stories and senses of shock and rupture work to interrupt, suspend, deny, or end the continuation of pasts and established trajectories from present to future, whether the 'boredom of national decline', the 'tyranny of European imperialism' (Gilroy, 2005), or the (dis)comfort of the familiar. Consider, for example, work on the changing economic geographies of post-Brexit Britain, especially for UK regions with the greatest levels of dependency on European Union markets. Los et al (2017) have shown that UK regions that voted strongly for leave tended to be the most dependent on the European Union for their economic development. As well as mapping the emergence and distribution of economic and other 'impacts' and following regional economic governance strategies and practices, geographers might also ask; through what means are futures of regional economic change, including loss, made present in people's everyday lives?; how do previously attached-to promises of a better future post-Brexit begin to fray, fade, remain and perhaps (re)intensify in ways that remind us that hopes and promises are entangled with economic forces?; how are changes to economic geographies

also lived as more or less subtle, more or less significant, changes of mood or alterations in the 'particular qualities' (after Williams 1977) of places and regions?

If we begin with the making-present of diverse futures, then we might also question what such presencing gives shape to. If people, groups and organisations relate to Brexit differently, then Brexit futures also create new forms of attachment and detachment that move people into and out of citizenship, and into and out of a myriad other forms of 'being-with' (Berlant, 2016: 394), both within and beyond the United Kingdom. Brexit futures reorganise, create and fracture various commons; they divide and unify in messy and incomplete ways. Thus, geographers may ask how these futures reflect an intensification of 'possessive attachments' or the opening up of new and responsive forms of nonsovereign relations (for a wider reflection on commons see Berlant 2016). At the most basic level, Brexit futures are about the distinction between leavers and remainers (or perhaps their increasing indistinction), about the reorganisation of relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union, and between different forms of citizenship and status both within the UK and beyond. Brexit has wider implications for international relations, the unity of the United Kingdom, the status of Gibraltar, and the stability of peace negotiations (Prentoulis et. al, 2017). But the geographies of Brexit are also about familial relations and histories, neighbourly associations, and workplace relationships, which play out in the context of claims of a 'divided country' and a 'divisive vote', and the waning and (re)intensification of such antagonisms. Brexit futures are as intimate as they are distant, about legal statuses, the felt, visceral dimensions of belonging, and the discontinuities that exist between them. Brexit futures therefore open up an opportunity to reflect on how spaces for new and emerging forms of solidarity, both progressive and otherwise, are created, reworked or closed down. Here we might think of connections to emerging work on various left and right-wing populisms amid claims of a 'crisis' of liberalism or neoliberalism. As well as learning from

existing theoretical resources around how 'the people' is discursively and affectively mobilised (Laclau 2005), work on Brexit as an everyday kind of thing might also explore how populisms are enacted as Brexit intensifies as a particular kind of event. We might consider the everyday material, affective, and often violent, energies that populisms relate to, and how the elements that make up a populism (invocations of the 'people', for example) are encountered by people as they coexist with elements from other partially connected geo-political formations (capitalism, (post)colonialism, (neo)liberalism, and so on).

If Brexit futures rework multiple commons and connect to changing political moods and forms of belonging, attachment and identification, then they demand a focus on bodies. As the most palpable example, racist attacks and spikes in hate crime have shown how Brexit futures attach to, and become *with* bodies as the site of racist markings and past legacies. Negotiations and possible futures are reliant on the restriction or continued flow of people, whilst calls for repatriation, deemed integral to the realisation of more extreme Brexit futures, are calls for the expulsion of those believed out of place. Meanwhile, the anticipation of possible futures has moved people into the streets to protest, occupy and support, to express outrage, strength and elation. If we are to take the body seriously as a site of Brexit futures, then we are also inclined to ask how the 'impression' of a seemingly major event, registers as embodied feeling – perhaps as a barely sensed shift, a rush of adrenaline, a debilitating anxiety or a lightness of feeling.

Finally, these reflections on relations lead us to ask; where is Brexit? Brexit futures are decided, negotiated and worked-out 'behind closed doors', in courtrooms, parliament, editorial offices, and on campaign trails, but they also surface in school playgrounds, on public buses and at the dinner table. Whether in ex-pat communities throughout continental Europe, Gibraltar and other disputed territories, or through the interpersonal networks that stretch across and link Europe, such everyday geographies of Brexit are not confined to the

United Kingdom. If Brexit futures appear as a collection of shared banalities that pepper everyday practice, we ask, how do Brexit futures become through everyday spaces? And, how do Brexit futures rework such ordinary sites? This offers a geography that can supplement, and coexist with, a focus on the (re)working of economic and political geographies as an 'impact' or 'consequence' of Brexit as an already existing event; a geography that follows how Brexit becomes part of the scenes and sites that compose people's everyday lives, and maps how the presence or absence of Brexit, and the specific ways in which it is invoked and encountered, shifts the relations that make ordinary spaces.

Concluding Comments: Everyday Brexits

To return to our opening point; the vote to leave the EU had the '*impression* of a major event'. This impression lives on, (re)surfaces and continues to be (re)produced across the innumerable ordinary sites where Brexit happens. But this impression now appears to coexist with other senses of the event, which are less dramatic and less disruptive as Brexit becomes part of the background of ordinary life and is greeted with hope, resignation, acceptance, impatience and indifference, amongst many other relations. With this commentary, we have not intended to be exhaustive about how geographers might research Brexit and (post)Brexit futures. Rather, we have turned our focus to a gap. If we begin in the midst of the present turmoil – between Brexit as a decision taken and Brexit as an event yet to happen – a geography of Brexit might start by following what kind of event it *becomes* as both an ordinary and an eruptive happening. This requires that we supplement a focus on what Brexit is a symptom of – what combinations of already known causes and conditions might explain it (and perhaps retrospectively dampen its exceptionality). It also requires that

we supplement a concern for prediction, and what implications it has for different people, policy, and constitutional change. This is not to deny the importance and necessity of geographical work that anticipates and maps emerging 'impacts' and 'consequences' amid changing economic geographies of, say, regional development or political geographies of shifting national and international territorial arrangements. Rather, what we have suggested is that these diagnoses and predictions do things – by treating Brexit as a particular kind of event (a symptom or set of impacts) they risk passing over what Brexit becomes as it is lived with/in. Focusing on people's ordinary ways of encountering, relating to and living with Brexit is necessary for understanding how the 'big issue' transformations of politics and economy that Brexit might become are always-already everyday phenomena lived in the midst of other changes. As the work of diagnosis and prediction begins, the event of Brexit continues to (re)produce and (re)animate relations of power, to (dis)orientate, and give rise to new forms of collective and bodily life that shape, unravel or enliven everyday practice and experience in often incoherent and fragmented ways. It is in and through ordinary spaces and forms of relation that Brexit surfaces as a collection of attachments, affects and ideas, and it to these everyday spaces of Brexit that we feel geographers are ideally placed to attend.

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