**Socio-Economic Review discussion forum:**

**Brexit: Understanding the Socio-Economic Origins and Possible Consequences**

**The reemergence of the nation-state and an opportunity for the Left**

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**Abstract:** *This paper proposes that Brexit revealed the disconnection between the state-as-an-idea and those who claim to represent it. Brexit supporters wanted to regain their sense of the state-idea and hold the state to its original commitment to care for its citizens. The Leave vote was not an appeal to the politicians leading the campaign, but a cry to the state itself: we should view Brexit populist groundswell as an attempt to reunite “the people” with “the state.” The challenge of the left, then, is not to bemoan the rise of narrow nationalism seen in calls for Scottish independence, but to nurture the localized sense of belonging and use this as a firm base for developing wider solidarities while building structures of voice and representation to ensure transparency, accountability and democracy.*

Numerous academic studies suggest that the state has been weakened in a globalized context, has stepped back in the context of neoliberal economic policies, has lost its unifying identity in the context of multiculturalism and increasing cross-border migration, and reduced its centralized intervention in the context of a culture of individualization.

However, in the millions of words written about Brexit both before the referendum and since, “the state” has played a starring role. There has been talk, for example, of the supranational state, the reestablishment of the sovereign state, the reinvigoration of the state’s identity, the weakening of the state’s economy, the breakdown of the UK state, and the emergence of the Scottish state. The “state” has been a point of reference for media commentators, politicians, academic bloggers and ordinary people expressing their hopes and fears surrounding the vote.

In its most straightforward manifestation, the state has been invoked in the Brexit-era return to a narrow nationalism anchored in the geographically-bounded notion of the nation state: this was reflected in talk of borders and control over “our” country, and of course in the idea that Scotland, having voted “Remain”, might soon leave the UK. Commentators, even the most critical, accepted this nation-state framing. Thus it is said that “Scotland” wanted to remain, though 38% of people residing in Scotland voted to leave, and “England” voted to leave, though 46.6% of residents voted to remain. It did not occur to anyone that “Scotland” had not in fact voted at all: it was British citizens who voted. Nonetheless, everyone accepts the logic that “Scotland” might claim independence while nobody outside the City seriously thinks London (59.9% Remain) might leave the UK.

In a sense, the Brexit referendum can be seen as the continuation of the Scottish independence referendum: the question then was of course set up in nationalist terms, but more interestingly, there was little in the way of an alternative framing by those arguing against Scottish independence, though a few brave souls did appeal to cross-border worker solidarity. So too in Brexit: nobody in the Remain camp dared put forward an EU-wide class-based analysis, let alone an analysis that took in the disparities of the global capitalist system. In short, the state – indeed, the nation-state – is the one clear winner of Brexit. Therefore we should take a closer look at what this signifies in today’s interconnected, globalized world: what do we mean by “state” in the context of Brexit?

An interesting perspective is “the state” in relation to populism. On one hand, we see frustration and anger towards the political elites, but on the other hand we see large swathes of the population clinging to a reinvigorated sense of nation-state and reenergizing a narrow nationalism. In other words, we seem to be seeing a disconnection between the people who aspire to represent the state on one hand, and the state as an institution, as an idea, as a point of reference on the other.

To grasp this disconnection, it is useful to think of the state in Philip Abrams’ (1988 [1977]) terms, as a “state-idea” which unifies the population under the banner of the common good, and masks what he called “politically organized subjection.” However, recent years have seen the rise of “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff 2014) in which state elites abandon the attempt to obtain acquiescence for unpopular economic policies, insulate certain policy areas from democratic influence, and react with ever-harsher punitive measures to social and political dissent. This, according to Katharina Bodirsky (2016), has led to the “unmasking” of the state: political elites no longer bother with even the pretense of working for the common good – “politically organized subjection” becomes an openly coercive project to suppress opposition to what she calls “neoliberal authoritarianism.”

This unmasking can be seen at the EU level and also at the national level, as reflected in the copious commentary on the democratic deficit of EU governing structures and UK leaders ignoring the “will of the voters”, and of course the harsh institutional and punitive steps taken to quash any development of an alternative. Viewed within this framework, I suggest the Brexit supporters (as well as the reluctant Remain voters on the political left) were attempting two things: firstly, they were trying to rebuild a sense of the state-idea, which – for all its suppressive potential – also provides a discursive vessel for unity and belonging, a normative framework that establishes a common viewpoint, in Koskenniemi’s (1994) terms. Secondly, they were holding the state to its promise, its original commitment to care for its citizens. This is why it did not matter that the political leaders of the Brexit campaign were of the same distrusted political elite, or that they often appeared as clownish if sometimes sinister buffoons. The Leave vote was not an appeal to them, but a cry to the state itself, as an institution or nexus of institutions more or less unified in a common goal, and as an idea – the state-idea of Abrams.

At the same time, the state-idea is being scaled down – clearly from the scale of the EU, whatever kind of “state” it may represent, but also from the scale of the UK. The discursive vessel must be smaller, the reference geography more contained – Scotland-sized, for example. So we should view the populist groundswell behind the Brexit vote as a call to reunite “the people” with “the state” – and for this, the UK is just too unwieldy, never mind the EU.

Of course, this scaling down caused much anguish and fear not just among the Remain voters, but also among many of the Leavers, including radical left Brexiteers, precisely because of its populist veneer: it seems to reflect a parochial, narrow-minded, intolerant and even xenophobic view, a “Jihad” response to the McWorld of the EU, in Barber’s (1995) terms. Certainly these elements were present; however, if we understand the vote as also stemming from an inability to grasp such broad loyalties – “the EU” – and reflecting a need for a more localized sense of belonging, we may also see that it opens up an opportunity for the left to create new solidarities.

The increasing interdependence of states in today’s globalized world means that very few states can claim to be autonomous and self-sufficient. The trappings of a traditional nation-state – most notably, perhaps, a military capable of defending its borders – have become obsolete for many, making it easier to set up a nominally independent state. The “national” can be reduced to identity, belonging, structures of representation, voice in day-to-day relatively local issues, while many formerly national issues including economic policy, foreign policy and warmongering remain on a trans- or international level. In other words, the Brexit referendum, the nationalism it appeared to unleash and the strident response from Scotland (as well as the timid response from Wales) reflect the breakdown of correspondence between various components of the nation-state, such as geographical area, identity, military capabilities and economy.

During the period of industrial capitalism, arguably the heyday of the working class, wider solidarities were developed despite, or on the basis of, the sense of local belonging in tight-knit working-class communities. The fragmentation of labor today may mean we must look elsewhere for the social foundation of wider solidarities, yet this breakdown in the overlap between the different components of the “traditional” nation-state may well facilitate this search. The challenge of the left, then, is not to bemoan the shrinking of geographic identities but to nurture the localized sense of belonging and use this as a firm base for developing such new solidarities while at the same time building the structures of voice and representation to ensure transparency, accountability and democracy.

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