BELONGING, PLACE & THE NATION

With contributions from Clive Lewis, Frances Foley, Francesca Klug, Anand Menon, Laura Basu, Stuart White, Esther Brown, Marius Ostrowski, Simon Duffy, Natasha Walter, Robin McAlpine, Laura Roth & Neal Lawson

Compass

About the authors:

Clive Lewis is the Labour MP for Norwich South. He has been Shadow Minister for Climate Change & Energy, Shadow Secretary of State for Defence, Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and, mostly recently, Shadow Minister for the Treasury, with a focus on Environmental Economics and Sustainable Finance.

Francesca Klug is an academic, advocate and activist. She is a visiting Professor at LSE Human Rights and was formerly a Professorial Research Fellow at the LSE Centre for the Study of Human Rights where she was also Director of the Human Rights Futures Project. She is the author of *A Magna Carta for all Humanity: Homing in on Human Rights* among other published works.

Frances Foley is deputy director of Compass.

Natasha Walter is the founder of the charity Women for Refugee Women, and the author of *The New Feminism* and *Living Dolls: the Return of Sexism*.

Esther Brown is a consultant at a London-based geopolitical advisory firm. She previously pursued graduate study at the University of Oxford, focusing on the intersection of gender and democracy. Her interests include electoral politics, foreign affairs, and social mobility, and she has previously written on progressive patriotism for the Fabian Society.

Marius Ostrowski is Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy, and was previously an Examination Fellow in Politics at All Souls College, University of Oxford. His interests lie in the theory and history of social democracy and European unification, and his publications include *Left Unity: Manifesto for a Progressive Alliance* (2020) and the edited series of *Collected Works* by the socialist thinker Eduard Bernstein (2018–).

Stuart White teaches political theory at Oxford University. He researches democratic political economy and rethinking the structures of democratic politics with a focus on the ongoing constitutional crisis of the UK. He is the co-editor, with Bruno Leipold and Karma Nabulsi, of *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition's Popular Heritage*, published by Oxford University Press in 2020.

Anand Menon is director of UK in a Changing Europe and Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London.

Compass

Simon Duffy is a philosopher, the Director of the [Centre for Welfare](#) and co-founder of [Citizen Network](#). He is best known for developing the concept of personal budgets, for which he was awarded the 2008 RSA Prince Albert Medal and the 2011 Social Policy Association Award for Outstanding Contribution.

Robin McAlpine is a Scottish campaigner who was the Director of the Common Weal think tank from 2014 to 2021. He has previously worked as a journalist, and was the first director of the Jimmy Reid Foundation.

Laura Roth is a political philosopher and activist. Her research and activism focus on municipalism, feminism, democracy and political culture. She's a member of [Minim Municipalist Observatory](#).

Laura Basu is [Europe Editor](#) for openDemocracy's ourEconomy section, and a researcher at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Utrecht University. She is the author of *[Media Amnesia: Rewriting the economic crisis](#)* and co-editor of *[The Media & Austerity](#)*.

Neal Lawson is executive director of Compass.

Compass

Please get in touch, join, support and work with us.

Write to us at Freepost Compass

Email us at info@compassonline.org.uk

You can follow us on Twitter @CompassOffice

To find out more about Compass, please visit our website: www.compassonline.org.uk/join

About Compass
Compass is a platform for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build networks of ideas, parties and organisations to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call 45° Change. The question we are trying to help solve, as we endeavour to #BuildBackBetter, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

Compass

Contents

Compass

Compass

Introduction

The predominant view of nationalism held by progressives and leftists is a negative one. Nationalism, according to this perspective, is based on creating and perpetuating morally arbitrary divisions which in turn encourage and promote bigotry, xenophobia and rancour. A quick look through recent history and this could hardly be disputed. As the political theorist John Dunn puts it: "Nationalism is the starkest political shame of the twentieth century".[1]

Despite a great deal of commentary and theory, though, the world is still organised via territorial states and jurisdictional units within which most political authorities engage in nationalising projects. Indeed, the rise of right populism in many so-called 'advanced democracies' suggests that nationalism is still a potent political force. In the United Kingdom, events like Brexit at least suggest a swing back to the nation-state. And political upheavals like the Labour Party's loss of the so-called Red Wall seats skews the debate to issues of the flag. What then is to be done? Should we try to confront the right with the left's own, more progressive, version of nationalism or patriotism? Or should we abandon these terms and instead try to build a different, unifying progressive path?

The problem, it seems, is particularly pronounced in the UK. The four constituent nations now sit uneasy with one another. Polls indicate consistent support for Scottish independence, and rising support for Welsh independence and Irish unification. As Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland move towards some kind of independence, the British state will need to be reimagined, and indeed the English question finally answered. In a recent interview with OpenDemocracy, Tom Nairn, a wise chronicler of these deep trends, spoke of how "In the next five years in one form or another break up is likely to come about, but what it is going to be replaced by is currently being worked out. What was once Great Britain, the British Empire … We are struggling along to replace that with something else … with something new".

This realisation is unavoidable. But with this comes more than just changing the architecture of our political institutions. Many find comfort in their being British (or English) – indeed the Brexit referendum, in part, ushered in the intensification of these identities so much so that categories such as class, income and economic ideology that used to structure British politics were arguably superseded by how individuals defined themselves to the nation.[2] In response to this, some on the left have reached for slogans like 'progressive patriotism' to address the concerns of at least some voters. But recent movements for racial justice across the world have instigated uncomfortable conversations about the vicious history and legacy of the British Empire, rightly unsettling notions like pride, place and tradition.

Compass

This publication is an attempt to provoke a discussion by addressing the many tensions and potential impasses that have seemingly prevented progressives from constructing successful alternative narratives to right nationalism/populism that are able to mobilise a broad alliance of different groups and perspectives.

In the collection we have Anand Menon on the UK and its future relationship with Europe, Natasha Walter on the hostile environment and the treatment of refugees, and Esther Brown and Marius Ostrowski on how the left can and should start thinking more deeply about foreign policy and how it relates to the nation-state and domestic policy. Robin McAlpine writes on why Scottish nationalism demonstrates how progressives should embrace nationalism, and Stuart White and Simon Duffy on how we might reimagine England and notions of patriotism via building new local and participatory democratic institutions. In a similar vein, Laura Roth writes on the municipalist movement and why its success shows a way forward for progressives everywhere. And Laura Basu argues persuasively that progressives should abandon attempts to fight the right with a so-called 'progressive patriotism' and instead opt for an intergalactic humanism. The collection also includes a transcribed conversation between Francesca Klug, Frances Foley and Clive Lewis on race, identity and belonging, and an afterword by Neal Lawson on where progressives go from here.

There are many disagreements amongst the various contributions – particularly between those who want to keep and, to a certain extent, embrace English or British identity and those who don't. But there are also important and recognisable points of agreement.

Firstly, that as the UK wrestles with what it is and where it's going – the break-up, or at the very least rearranging, of the Union, our relationship with Europe, the Black Lives Matter movement – concepts like patriotism and nationalism should be unpacked and not just used as 'brand values' to win back voters. Patriotism and nationalism are nebulous concepts not easily defined and while, as some of the contributions in this collection suggest, they might still be useful, they are often misunderstood. As Clive Lewis says in his conversation with Frances Foley and Francesca Klug, far too often they're used as supposed shortcuts to the hard work involved in genuine transformative change.

With that said, curiously, disagreements about identity often obscure a broad consensus across progressive perspectives – that our democratic and political infrastructure is broken and that a truly emancipatory politics would include a renewed commitment to the local, via reformed or new institutions that make people feel safe, secure and heard, providing them with what so many now lack: a sense that they belong and that they matter. The right have exploited these sentiments. It's time progressives fight back with a politics animated by vision, values and a policy agenda that speaks to the moment.

Compass

Endnotes

1. Dunn, J, (1979) *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, Cambridge University Press

2. Sobolewska, M and Ford, R, (2020), *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*, Cambridge University Press

Compass

A Dialogue on Race, Identity and Belonging

Clive Lewis, Francesca Klug and Frances Foley

Frances Foley (FF): Part of the reason we're approaching this as a conversation, I think, is that the questions we're addressing in this series can be quite hard to think about in the abstract. Because we all know that we've formed our views on these issues by our experiences, background and identities, but those things are very personal and very specific to each of us. I wanted to say that right at the outset because, I think, we're going to start from a place that's a bit more personal. So, my first question is to you, Clive: what does the term 'belonging' convey to you? What do you associate with that?

Clive Lewis (CL): It's a word that conveys warmth to me because it's about feeling as if you fit, that there's a community of mutual understanding; that you have things in common and are part of a community. So that's what belonging means to me, and it's a word that evokes warmth. But it can also conjure up far more negative connotations. If you don't feel you 'belong' it can evoke a sense of alienation and exclusion; of being an outsider. So, it's a double-edged term in the context of what we're discussing. If you're on the wrong side of the term, then it can create alienation, division and negatives.

FF: Do you associate that sense of belonging with specific people and specific places?

CL: It has to involve people, and it has to involve places. They don't necessarily have to be physical locations, they can also be institutions, structures. So, you can have a sense of belonging in terms of a political belonging. Where do you fit in? Where do you slot in? Family, friends, where you live, you have a sense of belonging, a sense of community, a sense of shared understanding, of shared identity. You can expand it to the country you live in, to the planet you live on. You could feel completely alien on planet earth, or within the country you live in. I'd say that belonging doesn't have to be a physical manifestation, it can be a political belonging, it can be a cultural belonging. Ultimately, it's something that can manifest in a multitude of ways, places, people, political creeds, organisations.

FF: So, for you specifically, can you think about certain times in your life where you've had a strong sense of belonging, and what do you link that to?

Compass

CL: I suppose the strongest sense of belonging I've had was in my childhood, with my English family, whom I spent most time with. It was also an age of innocence, I felt that I was loved and accepted for whom I was. If that wasn't the case, and it is possible there were prejudices, I wasn't old enough to see them. So, I suppose that ignorance was bliss and for the first twelve years of my life, that sense of belonging, my identity, was pretty much forged in the white, working-class community on my mother's side that I grew up in with a black father. I did experience racism, but to me that was something that wasn't structural, it was just people being unkind. Individual kids not being very nice to you. I didn't see the bigger structure that caused it.

For example, someone could call you a racial slur, one week. Another person could call you a smelly pig, or whatever, the week after. To me, they were both the same thing. So, I guess in that sense my time of belonging was a time of blissful ignorance, if I'm honest.

After that, once your eyes are opened to the reality of racism, when I became 13, 14, and my eyes were opened to it in a way it wasn't before, although I would never have used the term structural, I could see that my colour was going to have an impact on how people interacted with me, but also how I saw myself. So, as I went into my teens, I began to look for identity through music and through friendships, and through history and reading, to try and work out my place in that conversation. So, through hip hop, history, and other things which talked about these issues, I then began to find my place. I would then say my sense of belonging, if I'm honest, lessened. I may have found belonging in music, with what happened to the Maroons, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, or the Civil Rights movement and the people within it. But in terms of the people I was interacting with, still predominantly white peers, as I began to express that growing lack of belonging and ultimately alienation (from a belonging they took for granted) I very quickly realised it was a very controversial subject. Some took offence at what I was attempting to express and feel my way through. The term 'you've a chip on your shoulder' was one I heard a fair few times. Perhaps back then I expressed those things with the vigour and inexperience of youth, in a way that I wouldn't now, but I did then. Perhaps I did no such thing other than tell a harsh version of the truth? Either way it added to a sense of alienation.

FF: I suppose what's interesting about what you were saying is that crucial period when young people are moving to adulthood, it connects up the two parts of what you were saying which is, if you have the fortune of being part of a strong and loving family, you have to at some point cross that bridge.

CL: I remember vaguely a conversation with my mum, where I must've been expressing my anger. So, you know, I read about the Civil Rights movement, I'd read about slavery, I'd read about Jim Crow, I'd read about Malcolm X, I listened to hip hop, I watched what was happening in America,

Compass

I watched what was happening in this country. I identified with black people, not white people. I identified as black, and I've kept that identity, but I remember my mum saying to me, kind of hurt, 'I've always been here for you, and I always will be.' It made me think, 'Oh.' I'd talked so openly in front of my mum about how I felt about this. I'd never considered for a second that my mum could empathise, because she wasn't black. That's what she basically said to me. Then I started to think to myself, 'Hold on, I might be really angry with what's going on, and I might feel alienated, and I might feel more in touch with my black side, but I still love my grandparents, and my white family that were good to me, and my white cousins.' So, there was a discombobulation between having a slave name, and all the things I was coming to realise, and being angry with what had happened and the racism that still existed. And yet at the same time loving this big part of me and understanding that I was half them.

So, I can be angry about what's happened to my ancestors, and what's happening to my black side of the family now, the black community, but how could I ever hate? Because I was effectively hating myself, hating the family that I love. So, that then forces you to confront and look at this from perhaps a less 'tribal' perspective, which is why I think in my politics I struggle with 'tribalism'. Because I've had to come to terms with the fact that I'm in both camps and no camps. And that has brought me closer to my humanity. Humanity's camp is the one we can all be in.

FF: I wanted to bring in Francesca at this point, around that same question, this idea of belonging, and ask you to do a similar thing. When have you felt a powerful, strong sense of belonging, which was almost instinctive, in your life? As Clive was saying, this could also be affiliation as much as belonging. What are the things that, when I say belonging, jump out as strong associations or memories?

Francesca Klug (FK): Well I have had a more complicated relationship to belonging than Clive, I think, in the sense that it feels double-edged to me. It doesn't just evoke warmth, it also evokes a degree of oppression, in the sense of being born into a community where you're mostly expected to 'belong', regardless of how you feel, as you grow up. I was brought up in a North London Jewish community, in a family that was very conscious of our migrant-refugee background. My grandparents had all emigrated from Belarus, Russia or Poland, settling in the East End or Hackney. They were all Yiddish speakers from largely uneducated (in secular terms) orthodox Jewish families who had escaped a combination of poverty, pogroms and precariousness. This background, whose impact dominated my young years, set us apart, to an extent, from most 'English families', secure in their 'belonging' in the UK, and invoked in me, from a young age, a sense that, whilst I was personally very lucky, things had been much tougher for my parents and grandparents and could easily be so again. But the world completely shifted, culturally and socially, in my teens. The issue of where you fitted int o that accelerated shift was almost an inevitable question for any young person who was lucky enough to have the chance

to think about it. I think it was then I started to identify with others through my values and beliefs. These were what we might call progressive and strongly anti-racist, leading to my involvement in the Anti-Apartheid Movement from a young age, partly influenced by my family background. When second-wave feminism was at its height, in the mid-1970s, I was at university. So, I was able to join the groups and movements which had already been forged by those who came before me. Identities which combined socialism, feminism and anti-racism were already well developed, and I could just slot into them at exactly the right time for me. I felt at home with that, and I found a group of friends in Hackney, where we effectively formed an alternative family, and that's where I've felt I most belong ever since.

But – and this is perhaps what gives me access to this conversation and some of what Clive has been talking about – coming from a migrant-refugee, Jewish background, where extended family members had experienced waves of persecution in the heart of Europe, you find yourself comfortably belonging in your own defined space – as I've described – and then all of a sudden someone says something (implied or directly), or does something (intended or without thought), and you can feel completely shut out. It is almost like you're being pushed out through a cannon! That's obviously very relevant for debates that have been happening in the Labour Party recently, where some people like Clive know exactly what I mean, but others struggle to understand. I've also had this experience in other contexts, of course, far from 'progressive circles', including receiving regular anonymous, antisemitic hate mail at work some years back, which eventually led to a court case and a conviction. But when you believe you've found the place you 'belong' in – i.e., in the 'progressive groupings' that I'd adopted as a young woman, and then you find, once you mention that you are Jewish, that this assertion is misunderstood as solely a religious faith (when you don't have one), or you are tested on your views on a country you don't live in or visit (Israel) or you experience erasure of your family history (as inconsequential to your life now) any of that can make 'belonging' a sometimes complicated experience for me. You never know when this lack of full acceptance is going to come, and that's the hardest bit about it. So, when you feel most trusting, that is when you can most experience a sense of alienation. That response is no doubt influenced by, but also helps me understand better, the impulses of the community I grew up in because it echoes, in a much more minor sense, what has gone before.

FF: I do think what's interesting about what you just said, Francesca, is that whilst it's obviously true that not all people who have had those experiences can feel alienated, I think there's a universal element to some of this, which is that if we start from the assumption that most people as social beings have a deep need to feel accepted, and experience a sense of community, and somewhere they belong, then out of that, amazing things can flow, but also terrible things can flow as well. We all have these needs within us, so in this conversation about belonging there's also that

Compass

friction between pointing to things which seem universal and leaving space for specificity and particularity. But I also believe really strongly in the emancipatory power of being able to have conversations where we're not boxed in by our specific identities. Where I don't turn to Clive and say, 'No, you can never understand what it is to be a woman' because that doesn't help. He knows that, and all of us know that, in the same way, I'm white and I'm never going to be able to experience what it's like to be anything other than white.

At the same time, how do those bridges grow politically such that we can see and hear each other's experiences, and give some recognition to them, whilst also finding something which is greater than all of us? So that takes us into the next section of this, which is that bridge from the very personal to the political context, where you don't leave behind your personal experiences at any point, but you start to connect them to something that's wider, that's structural, that involves these imagined communities that people talk about, as well.

So, to start with you Clive, have you had the experience of trying to make that connection where you say 'here's the personal, subjective thing' and that makes you quite vulnerable, because you're talking about something that's personal and intimate, and then connect it to something which is political?

CL: I'm not afraid of expressing the fact that some of my subjective experiences will colour my politics. But here's the interesting thing, and this does link to the point you made about, you know, 'Clive can't understand what it's like to be a woman, and I don't understand what it's like to be black.' But whilst I don't know what it's like to be trans, I came to my position on trans issues, in part, by the subjective experience I've had as a black person. That I guess is where empathy comes in. You can show solidarity with someone without actually being them. Clearly not all my subjective experiences inform my political views, but some certainly do.

FF: Yes, I think it's important we create space for that in a way that is honest, and allows people both to understand literally where that person is coming from, and also allows people to dig into that depth a bit more. Now, I'm also aware of the other side of the coin on this, and this is why I wanted to bring Francesca in. Is there not some level at which we aspire to seek a more objective and universal view on some of these things? I know your human rights background might speak to this in some way. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on that.

FK: Well firstly, there's no doubt in my case that 'getting into' human rights is linked to my background. It has definitely propelled me to want to find connections between people whilst simultaneously being very aware of differences. This is partly because I know I can appear 'the same' as the majority, whilst also being an 'outsider-insider' for the reasons explained. I am a white-skinned European. (As it happens my great grandmother

Compass

was Mongolian, so to that degree I come from a mixed heritage, as many Jewish people do, with a large number stemming from North Africa or the Middle East.) But I have all the privileges and benefits of being white and I'm very conscious of that. Yet because I often don't feel that I'm fully part of the mainstream white Christian world in terms of belonging, it means that I can have a kind of dual perspective on the things we're discussing.

To address your question directly, Frances: human rights, if understood as stemming from the post-war Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provides a framework for addressing difference within a set of basic bottom-line values that can bind a society together, that are universal if you like. Within that framework freedom of conscience is absolute. People are entitled to their individual or collective identity, whatever it is, and their private thoughts associated with their identity. Even if some identities are, if you like, forged in pain and persecution, and some are forged by an accident of birth, they are all valid provided they do not cause harm. Human rights are not this abstract universalism, in other words, where actual human beings and their feelings and thoughts barely figure. It's quite the reverse. The post-war human rights project was explicitly based on trying to find a way through the particular and the universal. It absolutely wasn't about eviscerating difference, and I very much relate to that.

CL: What about your right of conscience to have an exclusive culture? So, for example, what about fascists', or Nazis', right to conscience, to have an exclusionary culture and a right to not want you to be a part of it?

FK: Well, that's the thing that is so sophisticated, in my view, about the human rights framework. It's such a shame that we've had successive governments who don't want us to understand it better, because there's a hell of a lot of wisdom packed into it. There's a distinction between what you think and what you do. The idea that governments mandate your thoughts is the ultimate Orwellian terror, but as soon as you act on your thoughts, then there may have to be necessary and proportionate limitations. So, if you want to think that all Jews are rich and powerful, and therefore should be exterminated, or if you think that all black people belong in Africa, there neither can, nor should, be a law that says those thoughts can't go into your head. But if you're going to express them, you're very likely to cause harm, and therefore there have to be limits to the expression of them. That, in a nutshell, is the human rights framework. It is an observable fact that many people will identify more, and be more comfortable with, some people rather than others and human rights standards rightly do not tell them there is something illegitimate about that. What is unacceptable is to act on your deeply felt identity in a way that causes harm to others, especially in a form that exercises power over others. And sometimes that 'action' can involve *speech* too.

These distinctions and boundaries are totally baked into the human

Compass

rights framework which is part of our law. If we applied it, instead of either ignoring it or redefining it as something it isn't, this might just help us a bit. It wouldn't solve everything, but it's just ridiculous that we don't apply this common-sense framework to help us navigate our daily lives very much and that it generally only crops up in the rare circumstances we might find ourselves in court.

CL: Yes, I mean, really, it sounds like a creed for different identities to rub shoulders, basically.

FK: Yes, which is not surprising when you consider that the human rights framework was developed out of the last time we virtually eliminated each other, during the Second World War, and since then there have been huge developments in human rights thinking and protections with input from a far more diverse set of influences and influencers. Most of the current debates on human rights emanate from the global South so I am not referring here to the European Enlightenment version of civil liberties, which can be linked to libertarianism or license in some people's minds. Of course post-war human rights law is also concerned with the relationship between the individual and the state and the Enlightenment strongly influenced it, but ultimately it's not the same creed. What I'm referring to now is a different way of trying to make sense of human lives where the starting point is difference, not uniformity. The drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, had just witnessed what happens if you won't accept difference. At the very heart of what was claimed to be 'civilised' Europe a war was started which nearly blew up the whole world and millions of people were killed through both conflict and genocide, including governments murdering huge numbers of their own citizens. So the realisation that something had 'gone wrong' with relying on Enlightenment theories of liberty and tolerance to safeguard democracy was one of the starting points of the multi-ethnic, multi-national and multi-faith drafters whose politics and philosophies ranged from socialism to Confucianism. The basis of the post-war human rights framework was absolutely *not* 'we only recognise European faiths and philosophy and we want to export them to the rest of the world!' That would be such a misreading, and it's so sad. You know, we don't all have to start from the beginning with every single generation, we can learn a bit from people that have come before.

CL: So, the point I want to make is that, as Francesca said, we stand on the shoulders of giants – the people who created the Universal Declaration of Human Rights etc. It comes from a place after the Second World War where it's teaching us how these different senses of identity can rub shoulders if they will buy into a certain set of universal approaches to how we work with one another, and how we treat one another. That to me is the bit that links everything and says, 'Yes, that's your identity, that's yours, that's yours. But what allows us to all rub shoulders together with minimal friction?' And that's really key for this conversation.

Compass

FK: Human societies, from the word go, have sought to develop an ethical framework for how they operate, haven't they? Obviously, that's what most religious texts are about. And it is a little bit frustrating when the intent to do that, in the modern era, is then redefined as some sort of crazy libertarianism or license for terrorists, or, from a different perspective, a metropolitan-elite globalist project. Yet seeking to find a code of ethics we can all live by is what human beings have done forever. One of the things that's gone so wrong is that we lose the ability to tap into wisdom if we categorise things like this before we've even considered them. That has been, to my mind, one of the really regressive products of this recent age, more than I can remember before.

FF: You mean by sticking a label on something before it even gets to the table to present itself, right? You've just been told, 'No, we're not even letting you there, because you're an X.' And that's the exclusion we're all talking about. The irony is that this is being directed towards the Human Rights Act, which is trying to supersede such exclusionary attitudes, right?

FK: Yes, sometimes you don't even know how to start a conversation, because people are eliminated from it before you begin. The labels that are used against the speaker can obliterate whole categories of thinking and being.

FF: That's a very interesting segue, because it brings us onto this next question, and of course here are the scare quotes, partly in order to interrogate this: 'identity politics'. I even feel very uncomfortable every time I say 'identity politics'. I've now started saying, 'the politics of identity' because I want to express it more neutrally.

When people say 'identity politics' and mean 'the bad kind', what they mean by that is that they're saying it's exclusionary, it shuts down conversation, it renders empathetic and honest conversations quite difficult.

Not to get too sidetracked onto the specificities of identity politics, or the politics of identity, my question to both of you is: How can a politics around identity be formed which potentially avoids the most damaging aspects of that exclusionary-inclusionary, rejection-acceptance dynamic?

CL: The question I've been trying to think through is why is it sometimes so difficult to talk about identity, and how do we talk about it?

For the first question I think we have to consider economic and material security. A lot of research suggests materially insecure communities are not as conducive to new, and what we would call progressive, ideas. So, if you think about after the Second World War in the UK, we were probably a fairer society in terms of material welfare. We had rationing,

Compass

we had a Labour government, building homes, the beginnings of the NHS and the welfare state. People were arguably more materially secure and thus more open, more tolerant. Not universally but generally. Hence this was a factor in explaining why some of the most progressive legislation, including human rights legislation, was developed. So, I think that's one thing.

How do you then begin to talk about that? I think the way you do that is, as Francesca has talked about, connecting through our common humanity, talking about what we have in common. What we can achieve together. So often throughout history after a traumatic war or plague, something that is a great social leveller, that brings people together, that sense of commonality allows for greater empathy, compassion and ultimately progressive action.

FF: Also, you ask questions. This is what's crucial. You ask questions for somebody else to get there themselves. You don't say, 'You're cancelled' or, 'What's wrong with you?' You say, 'Why did you think that?' which is how we all learn. I think it is leadership, to say to somebody, 'Have you thought about X?' then they have the opportunity to step into a space rather than have the door shut in their face.

CL: Yes, I think there is a role for leadership. To remind each other we have so much in common. To appeal to the better angels of our nature. Ultimately if we're democrats then we have to believe that people are good. This is a theme of [Rutger Bregman in his new book](#) – where he challenges the idea that humans are inherently bad. You know, the Stanford prison experiment, and so on. He uses history to try and give an alternative, one that challenges the right's economic rationalist argument that we're here to maximise our own self interest, look out for what's best for us individually.

FF: I think it is so important what you said about how you approach that, Clive. Let's recognise the fact that, people who do have the time to do the thinking, are often people who materially are better off. For those people to then look down their nose at people who don't have the time, or brain space, comes across as deeply condescending and patronising.

I thought what you said earlier about that scarcity point is so crucial to this conversation. Where it comes unanchored is when people pit identity against class as a basis of left thinking. That is missing a huge trick, but they're right in the sense that if you leave out the material element of this, it can feel a very incomplete picture. People's experience of that scarcity can lead to existential angst which can drive you towards horrible things, and we've seen this in Covid-19 as well. But, without sounding too high-minded, one of the ultimate paradoxes of humanity is that actually those moments of existential threat are often when humans show themselves to be the most selfless and generous, as we all know from millions of examples.

Compass

CL: So, I think what Covid-19 initially did is it brought people together, which is why George Floyd's death, I think, had an extra resonance. Normally deaths like that spike, and then they're gone, and it's the next news chapter. What happened was two things. One, there was a common sense of identity, our common humanity in the face of an existential threat. We saw a fellow human being murdered, and it was there for all the world to see. That then opened the door, which is going to bring us on to Black Lives Matter, for a new level of understanding. 'Why did he get treated like that? I know racism exists, but I thought we'd kind of got past that.' People had to ask that question. When you ask that question, it opens up chapters, even for me, which you just didn't know about. I thought I was quite race aware, I thought I knew a bit about history. That whole narrative about white privilege, about white sense of identity, about being white, about how we've got to where we are, is based on a lie. The analogy I would use is, when I was in Afghanistan I kept a diary, and wrote in it nearly every day. Then I put that diary away and didn't look at it for years, and I still haven't. But because I was making a film for the BBC, they asked me to look at it. I looked at this diary, and it didn't conform to my reality that I'd constructed, because it made me very anxious. The psychiatrist who was listening to me said, "That's because when you came back from Afghanistan, your brain constructed a reality that enabled you to deal with it. When you read that diary, it says to you that your reality is bullshit. This was your reality, and that discombobulation internally causes a friction.' It's not great!

That's what George Floyd's death and Black Lives Matter has done. It's basically cracked open the story that we have told ourselves. There's a parallel here with what Donald Trump's done from the other side of the political spectrum; the story that our statues tell about our history, and what we thought about our sense of identity, I think, it's really made people feel uncomfortable about the story that we're telling. Some people, it's made them double down, because it's like, 'I don't want that reality, no! Get away! All lives matter! We're a great country!' They want to hold onto that. But for a lot of people they've thought, 'Shit, this is challenging my identity. I thought we were the good guys? I thought we beat Nazi racism. I thought we were the ones that stopped the Holocaust.' So, for Black Lives Matter, it's like that diary. I knew it had a couple of extra secret pages, but it's like all of a sudden I've peeled away the back cover, three more chapters have dropped out, and I'm going, 'Oh! Wow! That's completely changed the story!'

FF: Presumably, Clive, at another level, it's also scary to think, 'I'm capable of constructing an alternative narrative'? We're almost scared of our own power of doing that. So, we'd rather accept that the one we've been brought up with is the true version of events than deal with the idea that we have the power collectively to reshape that.

CL: Let me give you an example. Hollywood made a fortune from telling a story, that the settlers, John Wayne, the cavalry, were forging a

Compass

new frontier and defending helpless women and children. They were committing acts of genocide, they were wiping out an entire people, and they turned that story into a Hollywood moneymaking machine, which has gone around the world, where even I bought into it. No one wanted to be the Indians when you played Cowboys and Indians. Everyone wanted to be, well the people that helped wipe out an entire way of life. That's a powerful thing. Because if you told yourself, 'We are the good guys' all your life, and all of a sudden people who were the good guys with you start saying, 'Actually, I think we were the bad guys' it's going to make you angry.

FK: Well, there's just so much to unpack in this, because there's so many layers, aren't there? Bringing together parts of the conversation we've had so far – on what we remember, how we remember, whether we remember – such questions are often redefined, and frequently downgraded, as 'identity politics' (rather than the politics of identity) right across the political spectrum; more on the right but I've seen it on the left as well. (I really love your distinction there, Frances, earlier). Some of the very same people, including in the Labour Party (particularly in New and Blue Labour) will talk about the importance of accepting that people have a national identity, feel patriotic, and have a sense of belonging and that the failure to appreciate this is where the left has gone wrong. They often cannot see the doublethink in that. So, it's called 'patriotism' which is apparently a good thing when people love their country and it's called 'identity politics' when someone says: 'Well, you're telling me that part of my country's history involves slave owners who enslaved the ancestors of thousands of British people. But you're telling me it's okay, because it's in the past, to have a memorial up there to them, which people whose ancestors were enslaved have to walk past every day, as this is apparently just an issue of identity politics and we mustn't erase history.' Yet if someone says singing an anthem about Britain ruling the waves and never ever being slaves is part of my identity, then this is categorised as patriotism which needs to be understood and respected by some of the same people who demand that some statues be taken down. So the way we talk about such things is partly a reflection of the unequal power people have to categorise them, to define even the basic building blocks of the conversation.

If there is legitimacy in feeling love of country provided it's somehow 'progressive,' or however you want to put it, how can there not be legitimacy in feeling hate for a statue that's meant to reflect on your country?

CL: What does progressive patriotism mean? First thing I ask is, 'what reality are we talking about?' If it is the John Wayne, Winston Churchill, unblemished hero, variation, I'm not patriotic. If it is far more truthful, if progressive patriotism is about saying, 'Let's look at our history of who we are, where we came from, why we're here, understand why we have the privilege, the power, the economic ability, the things that we've done, why we went into Iraq, neocolonialism, trade, debt, everything.' If we understand all that, come to terms with it, put in place policies and

approaches which are going to begin to deal with these issues, I can be patriotic because it's a country that is honest about itself; it's a country that is truthful to itself. I can't love the John Wayne history of my country. I can love a country that is being honest about its failings and its successes. At the moment, all it wants to talk about is a construct of its successes. Successes which have, in part, been built on the backs, and blood, of other countries and people. So, if anyone on the front bench, who uses the term 'progressive patriotism' tells me, 'Yes, this is about an honest conversation about our country, warts and all,' that's a progressive patriotism I can buy into. But no one's had that discussion, and I'm afraid to say, because they haven't had it, because they haven't unpacked it, I just think it's a very lazy way of saying, 'We want to take a really poor and very unfortunate term and try to adopt it with our professed values.'

FK: To develop your point further Clive, even within thoughtful, progressive circles, often when you start talking about English identity or Scottish or Welsh nationalism, eviscerated from that discussion is the question: 'what would England, or Britain, or even Scotland, or Wales, have been if it hadn't been for Empire and slavery?' How can we have a full and honest discussion without having a sense of everything that has gone into making these places and identities?' What Black Lives Matter has done, and what I find so liberating, is to force all of us to finally put this question on the agenda I also think that you cannot meaningfully have this conversation without bringing in the question of unequal *power* to define identity. When David Cameron repeatedly said, for example, 'We are a Christian country and we should not be afraid to say so,' on the one hand I didn't mind because I thought he was telling the truth. But on the other hand, the 'dog whistle' message I heard the Prime Minister convey to Muslims and other religious minorities was that this will never fully be 'your' country on equal terms to those of a European Christian heritage. Similarly, when Theresa May gave her famours 'citizen of nowhere' speech, it was bound to convey a sense of 'otherness' in many of us with migrant backgrounds and complex identities who don't have equal power to legitimise our 'multiple belongings'; that could apply to anyone who doesn't have family that goes back generations on this soil.

FF: Just to challenge where you think that takes us, or what you think the solution to that is, obviously you don't want to start a conversation about, 'Englishness', and then have to unpack it every single time?

FK: Absolutely! The problem is we haven't ever had this national conversation honestly and openly as a society, which is why it's so difficult to talk about it at all. On the left we might feel comfortable to talk about our 'English identity' by relating it to the Levellers and Diggers, and maybe the Suffragettes, and somehow, conveniently, ignore slavery and imperialism which is the basis of this country's wealth. Similarly, if somebody I don't know were to say, 'I feel really German, and I have a strong German identity' and doesn't say, 'But when I say those words I realise that in the name of German identity the most appalling crimes

were committed,' personally, I'm likely to feel uneasy when I listen to that. That's why it's not difficult for me to hear and feel a parallel issue here.

FF: So, to just play devil's advocate here, aren't all identities based on selective stories? There's no identity around the world which doesn't exclude the horrible bits that they've done to other people. That is problematic, for sure, but it's certainly not only certain countries who do that.

FK: Yes but it's a spectrum, isn't it? I've already given Germany as an example of a country that's faced up to its dark past, and of course there's kickback from it, but nevertheless, as a national project it's a success, in my view.

FF: Although I would just insert here there are issues with the way that Germany does it that end up being counterproductive sometimes.

FK: I can see there's some negatives, but I don't know if it goes so far as to be counterproductive. I mean, in the end, would a million refugees have been given a home in Germany had they not gone through this self-reflection about what German nationalism ultimately led to?

Like anything else, their approach needs finessing and reassessing over time. Another example might be the [1982 Canadian Charter of Rights](#) and Freedoms. Although it's a long way from perfect too, and has not by any means resolved all the conflicts of identity and belonging that date back to Canada's origins, the Charter includes sections on language rights, equality, democracy and what they call 'Aboriginal and treaty rights' as a mechanism for reconciliation over conflicts between the colonised and coloniser. How successful it has been I can't comment, but basically what Canada did, after a period of national consultation over a new constitutional framework, is incorporate an international human rights treaty into their law, just like we did with the Human Rights Act, plus a few additional chapters to address their particular history, and then called it Canadian. The implication is that to be Canadian is basically to embrace these universal human rights principles, alongside values and rights which reach into Canada's national story and troubled history.

FF: That's a great point.

FK: If we were on that journey, then I could perhaps start to feel patriotic about this country.

FF: It's both a recognition of the horrors that have gone before, and a positive assertion of what you're actually about.

FK: Exactly, and an attempt to embrace a universal framework alongside a recognition of Canada's particular history. It's a long time since I looked at it so there are probably lots of problems with it, but you get my point.

Compass

CL: I think you've summed it up beautifully. All I will say is that all families have so-called skeletons in their closet. Skeletons that cause problems inside your family which manifest as negative feelings, strained family interactions and arguments. Sometimes the best therapy is sunlight and fresh air and bringing the skeleton out.

FF: I think what you just said about that analogy with family is brilliant Clive, because if you think about that happening in the context of a family, where you basically all feel, 'For good or for ill, we're in this together and no one's going to get completely ostracised,' then going through some sort of process of reconciliation where you bring out unexplored stuff, can sort of exorcise those ghosts, right? You can see where I'm going. It's not a perfect analogy, but it's like, we as a country desperately need to put all this out there in order to be able to have these relationships with each other.

CL: To become stronger, yes.

FK: Totally, but I also think this unpacking has very real world consequences beyond what Gordon Brown and Tony Blair used to call 'social cohesion' with their 'British Values' projects. It's way beyond just being able to live together and have a sense of connectedness. I mean, it's also about how people understand the power relations, and inequalities in our society now. There is a story of dispossession, exploitation and subsequent interconnectedness which explains how we are all living here together now which needs understanding and unpacking. We'll never get it right until we do so. This idea that migrants and refugees are these hoards from the South, taking away our rights – our birthright – is such a distorted and self destructive mindset, but it's to some degree built into the psyche of our country. I don't see any other way to move forward and help young people in particular (maybe people of a certain age are never going to change their thinking, and there's no point wagging fingers at them) to think about the interconnectedness between us all that started so long ago, initiated by Britain and other parts of Europe for the purposes of profit and power. All this long before people tried to come here in boats now.

FF: One thing that I wanted to touch on some more is the distinction between patriotism and nationalism. I know that part of the way that some of these issues got raised was in Compass, because we had this conversation way back in August about 'progressive patriotism,' what that actually means, and nationalism.

CL: The problem, for me, with the term 'patriotism' is that it's synonymous with some of the worst excesses of British history. Defining it as a deference to a ruling elite is really useful, because that ties in with how ruling elites used 'mass popular culture' to sell the monarchy, military, Empire and patriotism. In the 19th and early 20th centuries there were literally t-shirts, pens, or the equivalent. It was part of this populist culture, that the working class were encouraged to buy into. If

we think about Labour's original Keir, i.e., Hardy, we can see he came up against that. He was marginalised by his own party in the First World War, for putting internationalist class solidarity above patriotism. So, even though they had that class solidarity, patriotism ensured deference to the elite and the war they wanted to pursue.

FK: I think there's a difference between, 'Well we've got to have administrative ways of running a territory, and I'm loyal to every human being in it' and somehow the territory having a life of its own, beyond the people in it. I have to be honest, unless it's at the moment of liberation from an imperial power or in response to an expansionist state threatening another country, I have misgivings about where nationalism, or even patriotism, tend to *lead*.

CL: Yes, I was going to come onto that, as well, Francesca. The nationalism aspect; historically that nationalist aspect, especially in England, has been expansionary. It's gone to other countries, so it doesn't end at our own borders. That loyalty to our own dominion, our own geographical area, has historically always looked outwards to other areas to dominate.

FF: Also, some of those people, famously, were kidnapped and deployed.

CL: Indentured.

FF: Yes, indentured, but also taken from the coasts of Cornwall. The numbers of people, men, women, and children, who were just kidnapped is actually quite staggering. And that is also a part of our history, right? We don't explore these things, because we don't explore that aspect of history.

FK: That's why it's essential not to essentialise it, isn't it? If you're really going to unpack history, then you have to bring in class massively, and acknowledge who gained, and who did not, rather than make imperialism some sort of inherited, essential way of being English or European.

FF: That's the difficult thing, how do you turn people's vulnerabilities and insecurities, sometimes material insecurities and precarities, into solidarity rather than into this survivalist fight for myself, and my people, and who 'my folk' are?

CL: Culture. I can hear myself repeat, but it feels to me that so much of it is about the political culture that you adopt, and how you approach your politics. That's a big thing that Compass and others are now trying to tease out of the left, which is that there's a different culture of being able to engage in these discussions. As opposed to the finger jabbing, which the left is very good at, and splitting, it's about trying to listen and understand. That's what I'm hoping for from Keir, and I think it's still possible that we can develop that culture inside our party, to critically question, analyse, find difference and agreement, and find understanding. It doesn't feel like it's happening at the moment.

FF: I also think ethics could be part of this. Actually, a lot of what we talked about today has been about morality, and ethics, and how they are foregrounded in our politics. People are not very good at talking about ethics in British politics.

FK: I so agree. It's why I got into human rights in the first place. Some people start thinking about human rights because of police brutality, for example, or because they feel strongly about free expression and protest. For me it was because I've been on the progressive left for as long as I can remember, and increasingly as I got older I felt there was something missing. Part of that could be put under the heading of love. Another way of describing that vacuum is ethics, and I discovered that ethics is what human rights are all about, at root. The same could be said about religions, I guess. They were on to something, those early humans, who recognised, in all different cultures around the world, that you have to have some sort of moral framework. The point about human rights is that it is a universal framework, not in the sense that there's no particulars, but in the sense that if there's something exclusive or excluding about a moral framework, there's something wrong with it. Because ultimately beyond America first and Britain first, there's humans first.

FF: To bring this, then, to the Labour Party, Clive, where do you find the space for this kind of approach? Do you see scope for trying to do things in a different way, whether implicitly or explicitly, more ethically?

CL: If we are to tackle the issues of racism, the material divisions within our society, what's happening internationally, the disconnect between our democracy and real power, it's going to have to be transformative, and we have to build an alliance to do that, but we always take the shortcut. That's what progressive patriotism is to me, it's a shortcut. 'I'm not prepared to do the hard work. I'm not prepared to build a movement. I'm not prepared to engage with those people, and to convince them actually to challenge this hegemony. I'm not prepared to build the necessary alliances in civil society. I'm not prepared to do any of that. I want to win in five years, I want power now, but on terms set by others.' That means that with the clock ticking on the environment, on inequality, on nuclear Armageddon, biological Armageddon, it's not an answer anymore. I don't want the sham anymore. So, my fear is, the issue of progressive patriotism is part of a narrative of wanting a shortcut.

But to end on a more optimistic note, in some way Covid-19 has shown us why change needs to be transformative. It shone a light on inequality throughout our society, unearthed the skeletons. Some of them are racial, some of them about class. Are we happy with the revelations? Some want them reburied. They don't want to face the past. And with good reason. They benefit from it. So how we approach this is important. Shouting 'you messed up, your ancestors did this,' which is what happens when you refuse to talk about it, isn't cathartic. But if it's more, 'alright, let's sit down and talk about this, let's have it out constructively,' that is better.

Compass

That allows for reconciliation and moving forward. It's why history, has in part, become the new battleground for this fight over culture and our identity.

Like most worthwhile things, it will be difficult, but we'll find ourselves in a better and a stronger place to go forward. I think now on the cusp of the 21st century, it's quite clear the world is changing. We've just left the EU, surely an ideal opportunity for renewal, and trying to work through some of these problems? We've got a choice. We don't have to carry on keeping these questions we've explored here as a skeleton in the closet. We can bring them out.

Compass

Asylum and British Values

Natasha Walter

"We have a proud tradition of giving refuge to those fleeing persecution."

"Britain and its people have a proud heritage of welcoming refugees."

"Britons are proud of our history of providing refuge to people seeking sanctuary."

"The UK is committed to continuing its proud tradition of providing a safe haven for refugees."

"The UK has a long and proud tradition of offering protection to vulnerable people who are fleeing war and persecution."

The quotations above echo across the years and across the parties in British politics – from Michael Howard to Tony Blair, from Gordon Brown to Theresa May, and even Priti Patel. They all speak in a single key: our country has this proud heritage, this long and proud tradition, of providing refuge, of offering protection, to vulnerable people who are fleeing war and persecution.

I have invoked this long and proud tradition myself from time to time, but when I do, I always hear sceptical voices in my head. One of them is the voice of my grandmother, who came to Britain in 1939. In some ways her story is the quintessence of the proud tradition. If Eva Stein, a teenage Jewish girl fleeing Nazism, hadn't managed to squeeze on to one of the last boats from Hamburg as the gates clanged shut all over Europe, she would have joined many of her family in the gas chambers. Britain opened its doors, and she did well in her new country – she worked, she married, she had children, she lived and died in safety.

Dig a little deeper, and the narrative becomes more complicated. Eva Stein did not come here as a refugee, because that was not a legal status until after the Refugee Convention of 1951. Instead, she came as an economic migrant, when a friend who had already got to London found a family who were prepared to sponsor her as a domestic worker. With no right to stay in her new country she was interned during the war on the Isle of Man. And, above all, she desperately tried to get her parents to safety too – and failed.

All her life, my grandmother kept the last telegram that she received from her parents, which arrived from Hamburg in 1942. A few months later they were taken by train to Treblinka. Not one of the 2004 Jews packed on to that train survived.

Compass

So I cannot help being aware of something that is more complicated than the myth of the proud tradition. Yes, this was a country that enabled around 80,000 Jews to find safety from Nazi Europe, but it also locked out thousands more, who were then murdered. Recent research suggests that around half a million Jews who applied for entry to Britain in the 1930s were denied. This refusal stemmed from a xenophobia that feels wearyingly familiar. The Daily Mail stated in 1938, "the way stateless Jews are pouring into every port of this country is becoming an outrage." Driven by such prejudice, British politicians refused to co-operate with international attempts to find shared strategies to help the refugees. As Lord Winterton stated at the Evian conference which failed to agree safe and legal routes in 1938: "Britain is not a country of immigration."

The other sceptical voices that I hear in my head if I try to talk about this long and proud tradition are the refugee women I meet today. Over the last 15 years I have met many women who have suffered far more than my grandmother in their attempts to find refuge here. I have met women fleeing political persecution from DR Congo and Ethiopia, women running from conflicts in Syria and Iraq, women escaping traffickers from Albania and China, women fleeing forced marriage and religious repression from Saudi Arabia and Iran. Many of them are struggling not only with the traumatic experiences that forced them out of their homelands, but also with the brutal and chaotic asylum process in the UK, which too often denies them refuge, locks them up and threatens them with deportation.

I met one of them, Angelique, 15 years ago in London. She had seen her parents killed in the civil war and political repression in DR Congo, and then escaped from prison herself to flee to Britain. When I met her, she had been refused asylum, and was pregnant and homeless. She was walking from one end of London to another, from church to charity, begging for food and for a bed for the night. "I had heard this was a safe country," she said incredulously to me, when she talked to me about her precarious life on the streets. It was after my encounter with Angelique, who showed me so clearly how this country fails women seeking safety, that I set up the charity Women for Refugee Women to stand up for refugee women's rights.

If I look at Britain with the sceptical voices of Angelique and Eva Stein in mind, I have to admit that dehumanisation and hostility directed now at refugees is as much part of the British tradition as any proud lineage of welcome. Over recent decades, we have seen politicians mouth this rhetoric about kindness while playing to the most xenophobic elements of our society, scapegoating refugees, disbelieving them, leaving them in camps in Europe or locking them up in detention here.

The policies that are now being mooted by this Conservative government are as bad as I have ever seen. With their proposals to push more refugees back into Europe or deny them rights to full legal process, they threaten

Compass

some of the most hard won rights of the last 70 years. But they have a deep foundation of hostility to build on. It was Tony Blair who demonised asylum seekers by pledging to halve the number of asylum claims and root out "abuse" of the asylum system, and it was under his watch that the detention of asylum seekers increased and thousands were forced into destitution and homelessness.

Even though politicians have often strengthened the hostility that Britain often shows to strangers, this is still not all that we are. British people can also be aware of the good that is deeply embedded in our society, and be proud of it, and build on it. The Jews that came here during the 1930s may not have been welcomed by many in the media and politics, but they were given homes by ordinary people who – often in defiance of their leaders – sponsored young Jewish workers and organised transports of Jewish children. And like waves of refugees both before and after them, they were then able to find ways to contribute, settle, and become part of the tapestry of British life.

The same kind of piecemeal, but warm and genuine, welcome still often exists for refugees today. Angelique, whom I met when she was pregnant and homeless, was helped off the streets and into safety by some very kind and very energetic people. These included others in the Congolese community, but also by a friend of mine who advocated for her, found her a lawyer and a home, and went on to establish a local migrants' centre to make sure that more refugees could settle into the neighbourhood. Now Angelique is working as a carer, and her daughter is doing well in school.

What I've learned across the years is that while we can't trust politicians to nurture a tradition of welcome we can see it being kept alive, day by day, by an interlocking movement of ordinary people. This culture of welcome is at least as strong and at least as deep as the hostility that politicians play to. And the real keepers of the tradition are those the politicians despise: the ones they call the do-gooders.

The families who gave space in their homes to the Jewish girls running from the death camps are matched now by the people up and down the UK who join refugee hosting schemes. The private citizens like Nicholas Winton who organised the kindertransport are matched now by survivors like Alf Dubs who campaign for safe and legal routes for children stuck in camps in Europe. This is the reality – that the people who keep the tradition of welcome alive are all the people who are often overlooked, the vicars, the doctors, the teachers, the volunteers in every town in the UK who are looking out for new arrivals, running English classes and knitting clubs, clothes exchanges and mentoring schemes, helping them to settle and contribute.

The beginning of the pandemic really shone a light, for me, on how this culture of welcome is flourishing today. Neighbourhood mutual aid groups sprang up quickly as society locked down, and their members saw humanity before they saw citizenship. When I checked in with mutual aid

Compass

groups to try to get help for vulnerable refugee women across London, I was startled by the response. Here was a plumber ready to mend a washing machine for a refugee in Redbridge. Here was a woman ready to buy a kettle for a refugee in Barnet. Here was a mum ready to take round supplies for a new baby in Tottenham. The response was never – is this a British citizen? The response was always – what can I do?

This kind of open and welcoming behaviour is threatened by the dangerous policies of populist politicians, but it grows everywhere even – or particularly – in hard times, like rosebay willowherb on a bombsite. It is easy to characterise this behaviour as naïve, but in fact it is pragmatic. People who stretch out hands of welcome know that building an inclusive society, one in which we will be able to grow old in safety and our children will be able to grow up in peace, starts right here, in the networks of kindness that we build in our streets and in our homes. If we deny this, we deny not only the humanity in others, but also the humanity in ourselves.

If politicians were to have more faith in this long tradition of welcome for those who seek safety here, they would build an asylum process that was a lot more empathetic than the one we have now – and also a lot more pragmatic. That isn't as hard as a lot of politicians seem to think; there are lots of great proposals around to make an asylum process that is dignified and fair, including improving access to legal advice and ending the use of detention. What's missing, currently, is the political will to build on such straightforward proposals.

If we are to build an asylum process that works for everyone, refugees and host communities, the tradition of stretching out a hand, seeing the humanity in everyone, needs to be recognised in this country. This proud culture is often threatened by politicians, but ordinary people everywhere are keeping it alive. One day, we may get better politicians who understand it, who will celebrate it, and who will dare to build the policies to match it.

Compass

Free to be...European?

Anand Menon

Brexit, as we heard ad nauseam, meant Brexit. But what does Brexit actually mean? More specifically, what does it imply about how we view ourselves as a country? The referendum and the subsequent, seemingly interminable, wrangles about how to implement it certainly polarised the country, and that lingering divide will have consequences. Yet while the Brexit division is real, this does not mean, in substantive terms, that leaving the EU was widely viewed as a chance for the UK to strike out in a new direction and redefine itself in relation to its European allies.

Brexit, as we all know by now, has reinforced a values division in British society that had been around for some time. The latest version of the British Social Attitudes Survey underlines the strength of what we can now refer to as 'Brexit identities', particularly in comparison to party attachments. A mere 7% feel 'very strongly attached' to a particular party, while 45% claimed to be either a 'very strong' Leaver or a 'very strong' Remainer.

Recent research underlines the strength and depth of this divide. The two Brexit tribes attribute positive characteristics to their own side and negative to the other. Only around half would be happy to talk politics with the other side; only a fifth of those with a Brexit identity would be happy about a prospective son- or daughter-in-law from the other side. Significant proportions of Leavers and Remainers prefer to live with someone from the same side of the divide. Identities, it turns out, run deep.

Given the strength of this divide, it would be naïve to assume that it will simply fade as the Brexit process recedes into the national rear-view mirror. Rather, as Professor Rob Ford suggested at the launch of the British Social Attitudes report, it is probable that Brexit identities continue to serve as a 'filter' through which people interpret the world around them. We can see this already in terms of opinion as to the potential impacts of leaving the EU. While pro-Europeans have become significantly more pessimistic about the economic implications of Brexit (56% felt the economy would be worse off in 2015, compared to 80% in 2019), only 42% of Eurosceptics share this opinion.

More broadly, we can begin to discern ways in which Brexit identities might come to shape attitudes to issues other than the UK's relationship with the EU. Oliver Kamm points to the overlap between those in favour of Brexit and those opposed to lockdown, and suggests that the common factor is 'a suspicion of authority as well as expertise'.

Compass

Our own research at the UK in a Changing Europe points to the fact that the Conservatives, having succeeded so well in assembling what was effectively a Leave coalition in December 2020, might decide that it is in their interests to make the most of 'values issues', whether that be immigration, or statues, or Rule Britannia. Indeed, our findings suggest that the Tories might find that internal unity is much easier to maintain over these questions than over more traditional 'left–right' issues such as the appropriate role of the state in the economy.

Turning to that question, it's worth reminding ourselves that, for many Conservative backers of Brexit, the problem with EU membership was not one primarily of politics or structures but rather of policy. Since Margaret Thatcher made her speech in Bruges about the dangers of a European super state, there has been a perception that the EU was a source of unnecessary regulation that stifled the competitiveness of the British economy. Bill Cash and Bernard Jenkin authored a paper in 2013 arguing that EU regulations overburdened the UK and cost economic output. Patrick Minford, the economist most associated with this school of thought, has claimed that the accumulated value of lost GDP due to EU regulation comes to 12% of GDP, or £240 billion.

Clearly, one can – and indeed should – debate the merits of these arguments. But the key point here is that, for many supporters of Brexit, taking power back from Brussels was not an end in itself but a means to the end of rolling back the regulations imposed on the UK by Brussels. Indeed, one reason the EU was so keen to ensure that the UK was tied to level-playing-field conditions, and so reluctant to believe repeated assurances that London had no intention of cutting regulatory standards, was precisely because Brexiters have spent thirty years insisting that deregulation was the ultimate prize to be gained from leaving the bloc.

Popular attitudes, however, do not seem to mirror these views. On the one hand, there is a real sense that the UK should enjoy greater control over specific policies. The BSA revealed widespread and consistent public support for ending freedom of movement, with even 48% of Remainers believing that people from the EU who want to come to live here should apply to do so in the same way as those from outside the EU. This at the same time as attitudes towards immigration have become notably more liberal and indeed as the issue itself has fallen dramatically in terms of perceived salience.

Yet while there is considerable support for the notion of the UK being free to do as it chooses, this in no way implies a corresponding desire to do things very differently. Remember, when it comes to the main functions of the state – health, pensions, education and so on – the British state is still recognisably a European one in both size and shape. The UK government spends about 40% of GDP – in Singapore (to take an example apparently favoured by some Tory Brexiters), the equivalent figure is 15%.

And there seems little appetite to use the control acquired by a post-

Compass

transition UK to change that situation. The BSA canvassed attitudes on a number of regulatory issues, and the findings indicate how little the public at large shares the deregulatory bent of a number of high-profile Tory Leavers. 74% of leave supporters are in favour of retaining EU rules on flight compensation, with 66% feeling the same about regulations on mobile-phone call costs (the equivalent figures for Remainers were 89% and 80%). Equally, when it comes to food-safety standards, a significant majority of both Leavers and Remainers were opposed to allowing the sale of either chlorinated chicken or hormone-treated beef.

Indeed, think about the Brexit negotiations for a moment. The reason the UK was not prepared to accept EU-style rules on state aids was the government's apparent desire for greater flexibility to subsidise domestic industry or 'national champions'. In other words, the prime minister wanted to use our new-found freedom to become less like Singapore and Hong Kong, or indeed the UK of Thatcher, Blair and Cameron, and more like France or Germany.

Of course, we do not know how the pandemic and the ensuing economic challenges will impact on such thinking. But it seems sensible to assume that the outcome of a crisis that has seen greater dependence on the munificence of the public purse and (at least for now) greater appreciation of the roles played by a number of public-sector workers will not be a hankering after a leaner, meaner state.

None of this is to say that Brexit and its aftermath will not present challenges to the Labour Party. Much will hinge on whether and how the Conservatives manage to maintain the 2019 coalition and whether Boris Johnson can indeed deploy values issues to good political effect.

Equally, however, Brexit provides a number of opportunities for the Opposition when it comes to the direction of policy, particularly in a post-pandemic environment. Early evidence suggests that even those who supported Brexit did not do so out of a desire to see the country reject what is a recognisably 'European' model of public policy. Part of the trick of effective opposition in the years to come will consist of a need to form a coherent and compelling argument that links any shortcomings in the ability of the state to provide the kinds of protections that a majority of the population seem to want to the economic impacts of the kind of Brexit the prime minister has delivered. That might – might – prove an effective means to split the Leave Alliance that put Mr Johnson in Number 10 in the first place.

It is of course early days, and, in the context of a global pandemic, ridiculously rash to attempt to predict how politics will unfold. For now, and in the context of this volume, the key point is that Brexit has indeed changed us and how we view ourselves. The Brexit tribes are here to stay, at least for the moment. Yet this does not mean an appetite for stark differentiation from Europe in substantive terms. We are, to deploy another over-used aphorism, leaving the EU, but not leaving Europe.

Compass

Patriotism in a Globalised World: Implications for Progressive Foreign Policy

Esther Brown and Marius Ostrowski

Until 2016, the British left was largely able to get by without a distinct foreign-policy vision of its own. The liberal international order had not come under serious challenge since the end of the Cold War, and the foreign-policy stances of all of Britain's major political parties reflected strongly overlapping commitments to the existing international-order ideals. At the same time, Britain enjoyed a firm and respected role as both an EU member state and the gateway to Atlanticist links with the United States.

But the global rise of national-populism on the far right has upended this order, and Britain is now forced to actively reconsider the role it wants to play in the global context. The international level is not normally a central plank of political parties' main ideological offering, and rarely features as a priority in the electorate's mind. But the new wave of national-populism has risen to prominence precisely because of its (negative) international focus: in Britain the Conservatives won the 2019 election almost exclusively on the promise to 'Get Brexit Done' and in the US the 'America First' outlook was the defining feature of the Trump presidency.

For most parties, their new foreign-policy commitments are a natural extension of their domestic goals. For the Conservatives, the pursuit of a 'go it alone' interpretation of Britain's new global role goes hand in hand with an embrace of a nationalist politics of 'divide and conquer'. On the opposition side, the Liberal Democrats and Greens have positioned themselves as nostalgic guardians of the old international order, finding rejuvenation in an almost anti-national Europeanism. For the SNP and other regionalists, Britain's changed global role now makes remaining in the Union a less stable prospect, leading them to double down on the combination of independence with a return to the European fold. This leaves Labour as the only party that has yet to settle its response to the new national-populist context.

The progressive left is traditionally suspicious of foreign policy because of its perceived association with assertive nationalism. Yet by avoiding the task of developing a proactive foreign-policy vision, it loses its ability to challenge the status quo, abrogating a major arena in which, as the Opposition, it must hold the Government to account. The 2019 election showed that patriotic sentiment carries a powerful mobilising force among the British public. By neglecting the new 'national turn',

the progressive left shuns the patriotism of some of the people it seeks to represent. Further, accepting the status quo of international politics can sometimes contradict its aim to undertake progressive reforms in domestic policy.

In this light, as the left reconsiders its offering to the electorate, it must keep in mind the need to integrate a compelling alternative foreign policy vision.

The Progressive Left: Between Patriotism and Internationalism

The left's complicated relationship with patriotism is closely tied to its long-standing suspicion of any policy articulated primarily and explicitly in a national idiom. To the progressive mind, appeals to the 'national interest' conjure up unpleasant images of imperialism, chauvinist bigotry and militarist exploits. Since the earliest days of the modern progressive movement, thinkers from Rosa Luxemburg to John Hobson, from Bertrand Russell to Alexandra Kollontai have castigated these as tools to perpetuate the economic, political and cultural subordination of the worst-off in society to nation-state institutions. Instead, they have variously emphasised international cooperation, tolerance, and the peaceful diffusion of sovereignty as the global conditions to which progressives should aspire.

Most of the problems of injustice and emancipation the left has historically made its own have either transcended or actively sought to weaken and redraw national borders as a significant force in global politics. The classic case of this is working-class solidarity, cultivated through partisan and trade-union internationals; but the same is also true of the global networks of intellectual and strategic exchange that supported causes of women's suffrage, anti-colonial emancipation and universal human rights. In all of these cases, the left's instinctive preference is to offer solutions that bypass the nation-state in favour of fostering an alternative global order built on non-governmental organisations and international institutions.

However, 100 years of progressive government experience has forced the left to concede the need for a national view. Yet its focus has remained mostly on domestic policy, through the establishment of complex fiscal bureaucracies, national welfare states, public education, healthcare, infrastructure services, wage and working conditions legislation, and electoral and constitutional reform. The foreign dimension of national policy is still not an area that the left has typically engaged with. When it does, it often adopts a negative attitude, mobilising criticism and resistance against the perceived egregiousnesses of the status quo.

Once in government, this dearth of a positive foreign-policy approach has led to the left often simply taking on and perpetuating the core assumptions of neoliberal (or even neoconservative) foreign policy. Left-

Compass

led governments have repeatedly been drawn into projects of naked realpolitik, ranging from 'humanitarian' interventionism to petropolitics and resource competition, often expressed through action by state-led coalitions that have deliberately operated outside of established global rules and frameworks. The left has been called out for this intermittently before by some of its own thinkers – including Eduard Bernstein and the Fabians – but it has yet to respond with a unique alternative way of dealing with the realities of nation-states' current engagements in the global system.

In other words, the left finds itself split into two camps: principled internationalists who are wary of the national sphere of action, and pragmatists who recognise the need to operate via the nation-state without acknowledging the tensions this introduces into their overarching ideology. Both of these alternatives are unsatisfying, potentially even debilitating in light of the central role that foreign policy has now assumed. If the progressive left is going to cultivate a national identity that is compatible with left values, it now has to be one that also has a foreign dimension.

The Case for Progressive Foreign Policy

Under Keir Starmer, Labour has made steps towards addressing its unanswered national question. Insofar as it has taken shape already, its revived brand of left patriotism embraces staple progressive elements such as elevated welfare commitments, championing strategic industries and a progressive tax policy, while also introducing new focuses on agrarian development and law and order, alongside veterans and the military. Together, these elements offer a promising recipe for using the nation-state as a vehicle to achieve progressive aims in the domestic policy arena. But as yet, they do not provide a framework to make the nation-state similarly effective at the international level.

Progressive foreign policy is not identical to progressive internationalism, because it accepts certain premises of the current global system that pure internationalism traditionally denies or seeks to overcome – above all, borders and the primacy of state actors. But this does not mean that it cannot act as a valuable stepping stone to achieving internationalist aims by another route. The relationship between national and international tiers is not a binary choice, but a mutually complementary interaction, best combined with progressive regionalist and localist strategy in recognition of the growing vertical diffusion of sovereignty and power. In other words, the left needs to stop seeing these different routes of activity in absolute 'all-or-nothing' terms, and add nuance to its theoretical prism.

The best way to sustain such a multi-level approach is to create clear points of ideological consistency and continuity between the domestic and foreign elements of progressive policy. The left cannot afford to succumb

Compass

to hypocritical tendencies by failing to join up its thinking on domestic and foreign concerns. This means, on the one hand, thinking carefully through the domestic implications of its foreign-policy decisions, but also, on the other hand, continuously bearing in mind the international ramifications of its domestic agenda.

If the progressive left is now to have a positive national identity, it needs to ensure that it retains the ability to reconcile this with its pro-international commitments. Given the advances it has made in articulating a progressive patriotic domestic programme, it should consciously allow itself to be guided by the same underlying principles in formulating its approach to foreign affairs.

Outlines of a Left-Patriotic Foreign Policy

At the heart of progressive ideology is a firm commitment to taking groups and collective identities seriously, with the aim of supporting and bettering the situation of the worst-off in society – i.e., those who are most disadvantaged or marginalised. Despite a modicum of resistance from certain ideological quarters, the last century of activism has persuaded the left that the primary and currently most efficacious vehicle for doing so is the state. The core principle that should inform the continuity between domestic and foreign policy is thus that progressive-led state institutions must extend this commitment of support to everyone in need of it, both at home and abroad.

In a British and more widely Euro-American context, seen from a global perspective, the 'home' population is on average in a significantly more advantaged position than many populations abroad (e.g., in the global South). This is a crucial truth that separates the patriotic left in a highly developed country from that in a still-developing country. If progressive domestic policies are designed to help the worst-off members of one's own population, there is always a risk that this may impose costs on even-worse-off populations in other countries. In developing countries, patriotic strategies can act as emancipatory tools to incrementally rebalance those countries' comparatively weak positions in global power hierarchies. But in developed countries there is a danger that similar strategies shore up existing dominance and perpetuate these hierarchies.

This means that the progressive left needs to be thoroughly circumspect when articulating a patriotic programme with a detailed international dimension. Its key task is to find a way to be patriotic towards its own population without turning everyone else into a lesser 'other' – i.e., to take national policy seriously without collapsing into the chauvinism it has traditionally opposed. Achieving continuity between domestic and foreign policy means making support for the worst-off in one's own society still compatible with support for disadvantaged 'others' in countries abroad.

The common thread that must distinguish a left-patriotic foreign policy is the centrality of multilateral engagement, which provides something akin

Compass

to a system of checks and balances at the global level. Operating within a body that equally disperses power among a sufficient number of different states reduces the chances of governments unilaterally or bilaterally imposing policies on other countries that are unfair, inappropriate to their circumstances, or which serve their own sectional benefit. This means using international institutions, or working as part of aligned groups, to level the global playing field and act as a mediation forum, rather than as means to secure preferential treatment for the biggest stakeholders.

In foreign trade, progressive policy must move towards a more sophisticated understanding of equality and inequality in global political economy – beyond the nominal equality of sovereign statehood to a recognition of real political and economic power disparities. Progressive trade deals must be based on mutually assured protections for vulnerable, nascent and strategically important industries, for which neither pure free trade nor pure protectionism (both of which favour powerful economies) allow. Deals must be redesigned to better incorporate a 'charitable' component, accommodating developing countries' disproportionately greater need to use state aid to protect and support infant industries – even at the cost of a slight hit to equivalent industries in developed countries.

This reorientation of state-led action need not come at the expense of the left's traditional approach of building progressive coalitions with non-governmental groups outside the nation-state framework. In fact, these extra-governmental alliances and continuous relationships are a vital way for the progressive left to stay closely attuned to foreign concerns, and to still have consistent and credible foreign-policy impact, even when it is confined to opposition.

Conclusion

The central challenge that confronts progressive foreign-policy thinkers is the need to play a proactive but not overly assertive role in the global system. When in government, the progressive left must be careful not to let its desire to redistribute global power and act as an ally to those who seek emancipation from oppression fall prey to the temptation to leverage whatever relative position of power it enjoys within the current order to simply impose its particular vision onto other countries.

Yet in a context where right-wing governments are being elected on foreign-policy promises, the left can no longer afford to continue ignoring foreign policy as a vital component of its ideological offering. The major political and economic questions facing societies today require state-led responses, both domestically and internationally. The progressive left has always worked on the assumption that its core constituencies and their concerns are largely universal across the globe. But 100 years of widely divergent trajectories of progressive evolution in different national, regional, local and continental contexts has shown the limitations of this

Compass

perspective.

The left has always struggled with international policy because of its inherent suspicions of the central role that nation-states play at the global level. But it has long since come to terms with the necessity of the state in domestic politics, and has developed many ways to instrumentalise it to achieve its domestic policy goals. It is high time the left applied the same logic to foreign affairs as well, taking concrete steps to convert the nation-state into a stepping stone to realising its internationalist ambitions. The right is perennially trapped by its inherent objections to anything that threatens to infringe state sovereignty, and is cementing this approach in both the domestic and foreign policy arenas. The recent national-populist wave that has fractured the old liberal order has created a vacuum of new thinking on progressive global leadership, and has eroded the foundations of multilateralism and fair trade. This offers the left a valuable opportunity to push forward with new approaches to international thinking, comprehensively reevaluating its foreign-policy position, and recrafting these aspects of progressive foreign policy as distinctly its own.

Compass

A New Kind of Dreaming: Democratic English Patriotism

Stuart White

'There is no future in England's dreaming.'
– Sex Pistols, 'God Save the Queen', 1977

On 7th June 2020, a determined assembly of anti-racist protestors pulled down the statue of a slavet rader from its plinth in Bristol, rolled it through the streets and threw it into the sea.[1] This was a historic moment, signalling that the nations of the UK cannot ignore the slave trade that is part of their history. Was the toppling of the statue a patriotic act? This might seem like an odd question. Being 'patriotic' was probably not part of the motivation of the people who removed the statue. On the other hand, many of those who were angered by its removal probably see themselves as ardent British – or English – patriots. But I ask the question because the notion of patriotism is much more contestable than we often assume. We can get a fresh perspective if we look to the republican political tradition.

Republican patriotism

Republicanism is a broad and complex tradition. According to Philip Pettit, it has at its core the value of liberty and a particular understanding of what liberty is: a free person is someone who is not subject to the arbitrary power of another.[2] Political theorists such as Karma Nabulsi and Maurizio Viroli have described in their works a related tradition of *republican patriotism*.[3] The republican patriot loves their country, their *patria*. But their love of country is shaped by and rooted in their love for liberty. The patriot seeks to make their country a home and a beacon for liberty. Slavery is the paradigm of subjection to the arbitrary will of another – the negation of liberty. If one's nation's history includes a history of slavery and profiting from the slave trade, then, for a republican patriot, this represents a profound violation of what the nation is properly about. What follows from this as regards public statues is an open question. But one can see how the removal of statues and monuments that commemorate slavetraders, or imperialists like Cecil Rhodes, makes sense as an expression of republican patriotism.

Of course, historically, republicanism has by no means been inclusive in the way I have just assumed. The slaveowners of the American colonies rebelled against the arbitrary power of the British Crown, which they claimed reduced them to slavery – while remaining slaveo wners. Republicans have conceived their *patria* in racially exclusionary ways, and in ways that privilege men and those with property. But the idea of

freedom as non-domination, of the freedom to live without subjection to arbitrary power, provides the basis for repudiating these exclusions and for a conception of patriotism that is genuinely about the *common* liberty, the liberty of all. The history of the American republic can be seen as a long, painful struggle over which kind of republic will ultimately prevail – the *republic of the Founding*, that of the white propertied male, whose 'freedom' implies the power to dominate; or the *republic of promise*, yet to be achieved, which will be the home of a genuinely common – multiracial – liberty. American patriotism consequently comes in two forms, depending on which republic it is ultimately committed to. Amanda Gorman's compelling poem at the Inauguration of Joe Biden as Upresident, 'The Hill We Climb', is, in my view, an expression of the second kind of American patriotism, aiming at the republic of promise:

> 'We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be:
> A country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free.'

Although the ruling class acted ruthlessly to suppress it, there is a history of republican patriotism in the nations of the UK including England. Democratic radicals in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, seeking universal manhood suffrage, referred to themselves as patriots. When Sheffield radicals established a new fortnightly magazine to discuss democratic ideas in the 1790s, they called it *The Patriot*, or *Political, Moral and Philosophical Repository*. The Manchester radicals who organised a rally in St. Peter's Fields in August 1819 – the event that the authorities turned into the Peterloo massacre – were the Manchester Patriotic Union.

Later in the 19th century, in the 1850s, William James Linton edited a newspaper, *The English Republic* (though his use of 'England' seems sometimes to encompass Scotland and other nations). Linton was strongly influenced by Giuseppe Mazzini and the Young Europe movement. As Karma Nabulsi discusses, this brought radical republicans together from across Europe in a way that emphasised both national patriotisms and solidarity between republican patriots of different nations.[4] Receptivity to refugees and asylum-seekers was seen as an obvious and important expression of solidarity across nations, to make freedom a possibility for all.

As an engraver, Linton produced many images that expressed his republican vision, including the cover of the issue of *The Red Republican* that published the first translation into English of *The Communist Manifesto*. In addition to political philosophy, Linton also wrote poetry to evoke the spirit of his imagined English republic. In one such poem, 'Our Tricolour'[5], published under the name 'Spartacus', he imagines the flag of the new English republic: a horizontal green stripe at the bottom, with a white stripe in the middle and a blue stripe at the top. His poem links this choice of colours to the natural features of the landscape – the green of the fields, the blue of the sky, and so on. But he also tries to link the flag to the universal values that he thinks republicans of all nations must seek

Compass

to uphold – to the rights of people everywhere to live in conditions of freedom and equality:

> 'BLUE – the far idea of might, harmonized Humanity;
> WHITE – the pure, world-circling light, universal Liberty:
> GREEN – the common home of man, Equality republican.'

It is easy to laugh at this. But what I find interesting here is not only the attempt to integrate national patriotism with transnational solidarity, but the highly creative way that Linton approaches his idea of the English republic. England is not an antiquarian inheritance to be treated with deference but something yet to be created. Linton has every intention, as a republican patriot, of helping to create this new thing and to bring all the resources of his imagination to bear in this enterprise.

Democratic English patriotism today

What does republican – or, as I prefer to say, democratic – patriotism mean for us today? (Outside of academic discussion, the term 'republican' tends to get us bogged down in narrow debates about the monarchy.)

A first, critical question is simply: What is our country?

My main intended readership here is people on the left in England. For many on the left in England, Britain is their country. The goal is a Labour or progressive government for Britain. But the left in England cannot continue to focus on Britain to the exclusion of England. Scottish independence is a realistic possibility in the not far off future. Irish reunification is moving onto the agenda. If the UK survives, it will likely be in a much more federal form. In this context, the left in England should accept that its primary territory of political action – in which it seeks to win power – is England.

This is an unattractive prospect for some because it is seen as embracing an already-existing English identity – a chauvinistic, racialized and racist identity which progressives should have nothing to do with. Moreover, some identify less as English and more as Northern, or from Yorkshire, as Cornish, or as Londoners. It is unattractive also because if we just subtract the rest of the UK from England with no change to basic political structures then it looks like we have a recipe for endless Tory rule.

But as Anthony Barnett puts it in *The Lure of Greatness*, we should give priority to democracy, not to identity.[6] The task is not to connect to a particular, established English identity and make politics an expression of this – to try to wrap progressive policy in the flag of St. George. The task, rather, is *to build democracy in England*.

It is worth pausing to consider what this means.

This task is, first, creative – and ambitiously so. If the question is, as

Compass

Sunder Katwala puts it, 'What does England want?', then our horizon should not start from the existing UK state, asking what modifications to it we would like.[7] Following Linton's example, let's take full imaginative ownership of this territory we call England. Let's ask in a completely fresh way what political structures we want for this England, and how we mean to get them. Do we want an English Parliament? Will a new English polity just be the existing UK state over a diminished territory, or will it be a new kind of state altogether with a profound rebalancing of power between regions *within* England? How do we get *that*? Will this require a radical change in the political economy? Do we even want England to remain a single political unit or should we have an independent North or Cornwall? And, as with Linton, this creativity should apply across the full range of political culture. William Blake's 'Jersualem' for the English national anthem? Maybe. But perhaps the English national anthem (if we have such a thing) has yet to be written.

Second, the building of democracy in England must be participatory, bottom-up, and inclusive. A contemporary, living democratic patriotism will emerge in the shared doing of democracy itself. The question 'How should we govern ourselves?' needs to be posed at all levels, from the neighbourhood to the level of England as a whole, and we can practice democracy in coming together to discuss and answer this question. The [Share the Same Skies](#) think-tank in West Yorkshire, developing the concept of Regional Democracy, is an excellent example of this (see Simon Duffy's contribution to this collection for more examples). Innovations such as Citizens' Assemblies can carry some of this discussion, but need to be public-facing and to find ways to feed off, and into, a wider debate.

No future?

The Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' ends with the refrain, 'No future', echoing the song's line, 'There is no future in England's dreaming'. For many years, I took this to mean: forget about 'England', England has no future.

But the line has more than one meaning. Yes, we should stop fuelling a certain fantastical dream of England that is racialized and entwined with the myths of Anglo-British empire. We should indeed disconnect from that dream, from what the song calls 'your mad parade' – and, amongst other things, this implies a frank reassessment of who we commemorate in our public spaces.

But the point also is that there is no *future* in England's dreaming – that the dream is all about who the English have supposedly been, and not about what we – a contemporary, multiracial 'we' – want for our future. What we need is not an end to dreaming, but a new kind of dreaming, one that is creative, forward-looking, open to new possibilities.

England *is* a future, one that waits for us to define it. It is a democracy, or democracies, we have yet to build. What kind of democracy or

Compass

democracies do we in England want? This is the dreaming that gives meaning today to a democratic English patriotism.

Endnotes

1.   Many thanks to Anthony Barnett, Udit Bhatia, Simon Duffy, Jack Jeffrey, Ian Martin and Katherine Wedell for their helpful comments.
2. Pettit, P, (1997) *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford University Press
3. Viroli, M, (1998) *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism*, Oxford University Press
, pp223-224
4. Nabulsi, K, (1999) *Traditions of War: Occupation, Resistance, and the Law***,** Oxford University Press, chapter 6; Nabulsi, K, (2006) 'Patriotism and Internationalism in the 'Oath of Allegiance' of Young Europe' (2006), *European Journal of Political Theory* 5 (1)
5. William James Linton ('Spartacus'), 'Our Tricolour', in Lees, R, (1850) ed., *The Truth-Seeker*, London
6. Barnett, A, (2018) *The Lure of Greatness: Britain's Brexit and America's Trump*, Unbound
7. Katwala, S, (2014) 'On Devolution: England Should Get What England Wants – It's Time to Find Out What That Is', British Future

Can the North Save England from Itself?

Simon Duffy

Power in England functions like a giant electromagnet, pulling all those interested in democracy and power towards Whitehall and Westminster. Those who are not pulled into this London energy field are politically invisible: too far away or simply not made of the right stuff – not really interested in playing the game of winning political influence.

I say England because, of course, after decades of efforts and political challenge, the other three countries of this disunited and unbalanced kingdom now do have their own centres of power and, despite the numerous difficulties that will lie ahead, sometime soon the United Kingdom will almost certainly cease to exist. It is hard to reimagine another betrayal of Scottish political identity like the Act of Union of 1707. Eventually Scotland will be independent, and at that point the whole house of cards is likely to fall.

But what then?

In the village of Dore, just outside Sheffield, there is a stone marking a key event in English history. In 829 the army of Edwin, the King of Northumbria (a large area very close to what we now call the North of England), met the army of King Egbert of Wessex. However, instead of fighting, Edwin chose to recognise Egbert as High King of England, and so at this moment England was born. It is a strange irony that the most celebrated year of English history is 1066, the year England was defeated, subjugated and colonised by the French; while 829, the year England was peacefully forged by the joining of North and South, is now almost completely forgotten.

This battle also prefigures an important reality. England was created by the North's acceptance of the dominance by the South, and arguably nothing has changed since. Although the North has had periods of power, wealth and influence, the general tendency for the past 1,200 years has been for power and money to flow remorselessly into the maw of London. Compare for instance the vast array of art held by the Tate London to the paltry display available in Tate Liverpool. Yet it was in Liverpool where Tate's fortune was begun. Although the North created much of England's wealth, that wealth is now largely squandered in the gambling house known as the City of London.[1]

The dominance of London is startling if you look at the relative wealth of England's regions. Average GDP per capita in London is over £46,000,

Compass

whereas in the North East it is just over £19,000. If London were a country then its economy would be equivalent to Brunei – the country with the 5th highest per capita income in the world. The North East is equivalent to Portugal, Yorkshire is equivalent to Estonia and the East Midlands is equivalent to Lithuania.[2] In other words, much of England has economies that are equivalent to countries that have suffered decades of fascist and communist oppression. The divergent life-chance differences between North and South are even more depressing: equivalent to those that existed between East and West Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall:

> "The North of England has persistently had poorer health than the rest of England and the gap has continued to widen over four decades and under five governments. Since 1965, this equates to 1.5 million excess premature deaths in the North compared with the rest of the country. The latest figures indicate that a baby boy born in Manchester can expect to live for 17 fewer years in good health, than a boy born in Richmond in London."[3]

This divergence in health and wealth is not based on the amazing talents of London's stockbrokers; it is an act of expropriation by which talent and resources are stolen from the North and misused in the South. At least, that is my Northern perspective.

However, I recognise that many on the left will find this 'regional' perspective on social justice irritating and parochial. Don't we want justice for everyone? Why should we particularly care about folk in Yorkshire, Cornwall or Barrow? Shouldn't we care about everyone? Isn't this all just Brexity nonsense?

Of course the shadow of Brexit cannot be avoided. Many European friends asked me why so many of the places that had benefited most from EU funds were also the places that wanted to leave the EU. Some even suspect that we Northerners, or other English provincials, are closet racists or xenophobes. However, I think the truth is very different.[4] Shortly after the referendum I was speaking to the leader of one Northern council who told me:

> "I know why people voted for Brexit around here. We're already ruled by one unelected bureaucracy we have no control of. Why do we need another one?"

In other words, when you experience political power as if it is a foreign or colonial force – whether it is one that shuts down your coal mines or hands out subsidies – what is clear is that you are not in control of your own destiny. You realise that you do not live in a functioning democracy. You feel something is wrong and something must be done about it. After the referendum result a Newsnight reporter asked a man in a pub in Blackburn why he'd voted for Brexit (for some reason Northerners are often interviewed in pubs by the BBC) and he replied:

Compass

"Well it couldn't get much f***'n worse, could it?"

On top of the anger and despair that drove us to this desperate measure there may be another more rational factor. In the old political game politicians often used Europe as a scapegoat for problems that were actually created in London.[5] Taking Brussels out of the equation strengthens the hand of the North and increases its chance to make the South more accountable. Westminster can no longer blame Europe for its failings if we are no longer part of Europe.

This brings us to the crux of the matter – place matters. It matters because without place there can be no citizenship, no inclusion and no sense of responsibility for each other. A sense of responsibility for place, for local citizen action and for neighbourhood democracy is not in conflict with a wider concern for all peoples, for the planet and for the natural world. True citizenship and a wider understanding of what really matters is nurtured by local pride and personal commitment. If we do not build social justice on a topsoil of our neighbourhoods, communities and regional identities we are only left with an increasingly shallow battle to control Westminster and Whitehall.

As Melissa Lane observes, cosmopolitanism, the ethical theory that rejected the importance of identities, was developed by cynic and stoic philosophers in a time of empire, when democracy was no longer feasible.[6] The spirit of self-empowerment, adult education and collective action upon which the achievements of socialism have been built has now largely vanished. It has been replaced by think tanks, foundations, bureaucracies, statistics and systems. Power is in the hands of a deathly and elitist oligarchy detached from ordinary life.

We need place if we are going to be citizens, because we need something that we can be responsible for. We need to be able to shape our villages, our towns and our cities. We need to be able to create our own organisations, bylaws and civic constitutions. We need to be able to address injustices in our own way, learning from fellow citizens, in other places, about how they tackled environmental destruction, economic injustice and exploitation. We need to learn how to take care of each other in ways that respect dignity and rights and create diverse welcoming communities. We need to be collaborative; but we also need to be ourselves, with our own distinct identities. These are the essential ingredients of a good human life.

Of course place-based politics, without checks and balances, without a wider ethical perspective, can become dangerous. It can certainly be exploited by the unscrupulous. But at the moment we have too little faith in ordinary people and too much faith in the rationality of concentrated power.

Compass

Is this the moment for change?

There are growing signs of a resurgence in local power, although it is a confused and conflicted picture. The emergence of mutual aid in the face of Covid-19 has reminded many that free local action is not only possible, it is often more effective and fulfilling than waiting for action from above. The recent emergence of the [Movement for Neighbourhood Democracy](#) is a sign that many would like to see a more participative form of democracy at a truly local level.

Likewise the [Flatpack Democracy](#) movement, building on the local democratic revolution in Frome, has demonstrated that older democratic structures can be reinvented to take on a more truly democratic form. Many groups are now exploring how they can recapture the old local structures of parish and town councils and inject them with this new democratic spirit. The [People's Powerhouse](#) – set up to challenge George Osbourne's phoney Northern Powerhouse – is uniting voices across the North in an exploration of the kinds of genuine devolution people really want. New local think tanks are emerging, like [Same Skies](#), bringing together people in West Yorkshire to imagine a better region. Local authorities in Yorkshire are collaborating in a call for One Yorkshire, as a better framework for devolution than the current piecemeal nonsense. There are also new political forces emerging, like the Yorkshire Party, which has been taking local council seats from both Conservatives and Labour. Interestingly the Northern Independent Party has now emerged, arguing for the creation of an independent Northumbria, built on democratic-socialist principles. Mebyon Kernow in Cornwall has an even longer history, and is holding out for an independent nation of Cornwall.

But so what?

I understand that these efforts will seem ludicrously small and insignificant from the perspective of London. But for decades Labour took votes in Scotland for granted, and now Scotland seems entirely lost to Labour. Fundamental change often starts small, but its logic can be irreversible. The ideologies of Thatcher and Blair were foreign to Scotland, and so progressive Scots realised that only if they took their destiny in their own hands could they reverse the journey to increased inequality and injustice. Achieving sovereignty and freedom makes a lot of sense if you have more faith in yourself than in those who have power over you. As Benedict Anderson observed in *Imagined Communities*, national identity is a powerful tool in the battle to resist injustice.[7]

I do not underestimate the difficulties ahead. I would love to see a rational process leading to the development of a new constitution with constitutional protections for the local, as is normal in the rest of the world. But in the UK most politicians still seem to see a formal constitution as a threat to their own power – which of course is exactly what a constitution is: an arrangement to define and constrain central executive authority.

Compass

It is because we lack meaningful constitutional checks and balances that England is now the most centralised welfare state in the world. Our human rights are not protected, local power is not defined, boundaries can be changed with ease, elections can be gerrymandered and local authorities can be bullied by central government. Perhaps even more importantly there is no real awareness of how peculiar we are. We have normalised centralisation and this is reinforced by our corrupt and centralised media.

How brutal this can be was brought home to me in the early days of austerity. The Centre for Welfare Reform was highly focused on trying to show how severe the cuts to local government were and how damaging this was to disabled people, to social care and to other local community services.[8] However, interest from the media was non-existent and local government was unable to organise its own resistance. I spoke to one chief executive of a Northern council about this and he said:

> "I was told by Eric Pickles [then head of the Department of Communities and Local Government] that if we made a fuss about the cuts he'd send the Boundary Commission in."

In other words, central government in the UK habitually bullies and threatens local government into submission. There are no counter-balances and Westminster's second chamber, instead of representing local voices, is merely another tool for centralised patronage.

Can we develop a passion for the local?

I don't think it will be easy. But in the proud city of Sheffield I think we will give it a try. The recent It's Our City campaign has forced a referendum on the future governance of the city and there are many of us seeking to build a truly democratic and just future for the city we love. Perhaps it will be in places like Sheffield that we can demonstrate a better way forward.

To change their approach progressives must start to trust people, instead of putting its faith in brute power. And this requires humility – being open to other points of view, being prepared to give people power and a chance to try things their own way. We must rejoice in all our diversities, including our local identities, traditions and structures. We must focus more on the true meaning of democracy, recognising the need for participation, discussion and popular sovereignty.

I am reminded that every magnet needs its polar opposite. England was created by the North's submission to the South. But perhaps England can only be saved by the North. If the North begins to organise to reclaim its own sovereignty, create its own power and exercise its distinct voice it may be able to wake the rest of England up to the need for radical reform, before it is too late.

Compass

Endnotes

1. Of course, such exploitation is relative; for Britain's wealth is also based on slavery and colonial exploitation.
2. Harari, D (2018), Regional and local economic growth statistics. London: House of Commons Library and IMF (2020) data on GDP (PPP)
3. Inquiry Panel on Health Equity for the North of England (2014)
4. Dorling, D, (2016) Brexit: the decision of a divided country, BMJ
5. Howells C & Yapp C (2013) Commissioning and Community Sourcing, Sheffield: Centre for Welfare Reform
6. See Lane M (2014) Greek and Roman Political Ideas. London: Pelican
7. Anderson B (2016) *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso
8. See, for example Duffy, S (2014), Counting the Cuts. Sheffield: Centre for Welfare Reform

Compass

Progressive Patriotism? How about Intergalactic Humanism

Laura Basu

The question has resurfaced lately as to whether the left should try to create a progressive form of nationalism to counter a virulent white nationalism and proto-fascism, and capture some of those who have fallen under its spell.[1]

The argument goes that such a powerful, seemingly primal, force as nationalism shouldn't be left to the merchants of hate. But is it actually possible to disentangle racism from nationalism and create a progressive nationalism free from the spectre of race? Or can we conceive of other ways of being and forms of belonging that offer more than the nation-state and nationalism?

I grew up in the 1980s and 90s as a mixed-race kid in the London borough of Newham, one of the most multicultural areas of the UK. Then, at age 11, I was sent to secondary school in whitest Essex. There were only about five people of colour in my year, and I was the only one who had been raised a scrappy anti-racist. To bait me, one boy would sing the football chant 'there ain't no black in the Union Jack' under his breath as we crossed paths on our way to and from what was regularly called the 'paki shop' – the local newsagents where we bought our crisps and sweets.

It was only much later that I read Paul Gilroy's 1987 book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, which was about the 'new racism' that was on the rise in Thatcher's Britain. That racism no longer identified race and racial superiority as something biological, but as cultural, and as tightly bound up with nationality and national belonging.

It was for that reason that Gilroy argued that anyone trying to reclaim nationalism for the left could only do so if they ignored racism. Anyone who is used to being asked where they are really from or told to 'go back to their own country' would most likely agree.

But is it only this 'new racism', emerging in the decades after decolonisation that brought many from former colonies to settle in the former imperial centres, that is so deeply entwined with nationalism? To answer that, we need to unpick a whole knot of terms and the relationships among them, all of which are complicated and contested. You really can't even begin to think about nationalism as an ideology without thinking about its correlative sociopolitical entity: the nation-state. But then, what's the relationship between the nation-state and empire? The nation-state and capitalism? Capitalism and race?

The dance of the isms

On its Wikipedia page, the nation-state is contrasted with other forms of state, including empires. But in practice, the nation-state has always been associated with different forms of imperialism since its ascent in 16th century Europe. The rise of the nation-state coincided with colonial extraction in the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade and the genocide of Native American populations by rival absolute monarchies pursuing geopolitical objectives.

It was colonialism and slavery that provided the initial capital investments needed to fuel the industrial revolution and capitalist development. Karl Marx called this 'primitive accumulation' – the theft of land and labour that preceded capitalist development and on which it depended. For Marx, capitalism was inherently exploitative because it was based on a hierarchical division between two classes. Capitalists control the resources humans need to live, and workers have to sell their labour power for wages to be able to get access to those resources. Workers create the value which capitalists take as profit.

But ever since its beginnings, capitalism has always relied on areas of exploitation beyond that of the worker by the capitalist. Primitive accumulation isn't something that just happened once, at the beginning of capitalism – it is an ongoing process. The social theorist Nancy Fraser, drawing on world-systems theory and ecofeminism, identifies three such areas: the unpaid care and domestic work of women, colonial looting of land and labour, and the exploitation of non-human nature.[2] Without these fundamentally violent sources of extraction, it's questionable whether the profits needed to drive capitalism could keep rolling in, even with the basic class exploitation of workers.

Capitalism is inherently imperialistic due to its basic drive: the search for profit. Firms will always try to expand, including overseas, and will face an incentive to pay low wages, grab land or extract value in any other way they can possibly get away with, in order to make a buck.[3]

The European absolute monarchies became republics or constitutional monarchies in the 19th century, as a middle class grew off the back of colonial expansion into Africa, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, and expansion into the Americas and far east as zones of influence. This time it was driven not by fundamentally political objectives but by the needs of the large firms that had developed for enlarged markets. Inter-imperial rivalries exploded into the First World War. After the Second World War, the period of decolonisation – driven to a large extent by nationalist independence struggles – led to a proliferation of nation-states but didn't lead to the end of imperialism. Rather, it marked the beginning of what Walter Rodney called 'neo-colonialism': formal colonies gave way to a set of colonialist economic relationships,

Compass

with the US and Soviet Union as the two imperial centres.

The period of decolonisation didn't even offer a real alternative to capitalist imperialism, despite the two superpowers' competing ideologies. In fact, they masked two different forms of capitalism, one based on private property and one based on state property.[4] Producing commodities in exchange for wages remained the basis of the economy in both cases.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the world entered the phase of neoliberal globalisation, of which we seem to be at the tail end – an intensified form of imperialism with the US at its centre orbited by other 'advanced economies' and increasingly the 'emerging economies' that were able to evade neo-colonial manoeuvres in the previous period.

Many commentators on globalisation have argued that the nation-state is waning in a world dominated by global finance, multilateralism, and the transnational corporation. Indeed, the current rise of Trumpist-style nationalism is often seen as a reaction to this loss of national power.

In reality however, the opposite is true. Transnational corporations need the bureaucracies – and legal systems and militaries and police forces – of nation-states in order to operate. Although they are transnational, corporations are historically linked to and headquartered in particular countries. Nation-states don't exist in isolation but in competitive relation to each other in the inter-state system, and they tend to back the corporations that are linked with them. It's true that national democracies have been hijacked by transnational corporate power, but this has happened with the help of nation-states. The inter-state system remains the primary political framework through which global capitalism is mediated.

But countries don't compete on a level playing field: the inter-state system is hierarchical. Countries with historical dominance due to colonialism do everything in their power to maintain their dominance and the subordination of other countries. This is why the current inter-state system can be described as imperialistic. It's no coincidence that most transnational corporations are headquartered in the US, western Europe and Japan.

Not that the pecking order is set in stone. Over time, countries can and do change place, as seen most glaringly in the case of China. While the nation-state itself remains a key political agent, Trumpists might be right to feel that the US is on the decline as the major imperial player. Instead of gun boats, the main instruments of today's imperialism are international debt, the rules of trade and investment, and state borders.

What are countries for?

Where does race fit into this story of nation, capitalism and empire?

Compass

Although there were concepts of race and racism prior to European colonisation, the modern concept of race – based around the idea of white supremacy – was part and parcel of the imperial project. Though we might think of race as something biological, it's actually a social construct. As Paul Gilroy wrote, race is a product of racism, not the other way round. Race and racial hierarchy go hand in hand, and it is this racial hierarchy that enables conquest, plunder and death – the imperialist primitive accumulation that capitalism can't live without. And as we have seen, nation-states were and continue to be the main agents of this imperialism. Not that race and nation map onto each other precisely. Race, class and nationality are interconnecting frameworks for creating hierarchies among people. There can be many 'races' within a nation, and it is for that reason that some feel that nationalism has the potential to transcend and expel racism. There are also many wealthy capitalists who are racialised as something other than white. And, as internationalist socialists have always pointed out, the imagined unity of nation-states masks the basic class division running through them.

But there is also a sort of class relation between countries, and that relation tends to be racialised. Do you really think it's a coincidence that Trump's 'shithole countries' – including Haiti, El Salvador and African countries – are racialised as brown or Black?

Race is what greases the wheels of the international division of labour, in which those who produce most of the world's wealth are shut out – by state borders – from reaping its benefits.[5] It's what allows the paying of ultra-low wages in the supply chains of multinational corporations mostly headquartered in the global North. It's what allows the dispossession of land and extraction of resources. And it's what allows thousands to die in war or in attempts to cross borders in order to escape war or poverty. This dynamic is repeated *within* state borders – as all those statistics about health and education outcomes, income disparities and prison populations that our governments keep ignoring tell us. Those who are most exploited – who, as we are now discovering, are often our 'essential workers' – tend to be racialised as something other than white. This is why those pitting 'identity politics' against class are missing the point: class *is a race issue*, as it is a gender issue. And the process of racialised primitive accumulation is inherently violent, so racial violence on a state level – from police killings to burka bans – should come as no surprise, even if it doesn't seem directly related to economic exploitation.

What about the progressive or indeed revolutionary nationalisms that have fought imperial power for independence, you may ask. Black nationalism, the nationalisms of decolonial struggles, even Scottish nationalism, discussed by Robin McAlpine in this publication?

There is a world of difference between nationalisms based on conquest and those based on emancipation, and the two should never be equated. But if the end-game of those latter nationalisms is simply to have a separate nation-state that will find its place in the existing inter-state

system, what chance is there that it will end up being truly emancipatory?

I tend to support nationalist independence movements, but only because they are resisting bigger and more entrenched powers – not because I think they will actually result in something good.

To hammer the point home, while the nation-state is part of the inter-state political framework for capitalism – a global system which is inherently exploitative (class) and even inherently imperialist (race) – it will always also be a means for valuing people along class and race lines, and carrying out looting and exclusion along those axis. That's what countries are for.

For that reason, while nationalism is attached to nation-states, it will always be exploitative, and probably racist.

If we try really hard, we might be able to imagine a nation-state that is not part of the capitalist inter-state system, and therefore a nationalism that is not necessarily racist. But why would we want to? If we are going to be making leaps of the imagination, we may as well imagine something that is actually good. In fact, that's exactly what we should do.

Intergalactic humanism

My instinctive internationalism has always been based on the sense that no matter where we're from, we are all humans and we all matter the same. I suppose, then, that my internationalism is based on a kind of humanism.

But that's tricky, because humanism has actually been precisely part of the problem I have been describing. The idea that humans are special, that they matter more than all other species, has been central to the project of what indigenous scholars have called 'modernity-coloniality' that has wreaked havoc on our planet[6].

Not only has this kind of humanism imposed a hierarchy of species with humans on top, it has in that same process created hierarchies *within* humanity. Speciesism and racism, humanism and imperialism, go hand in hand.

Racism has worked by designating some people as less than human, as closer to nature: there, like nature, to be conquered and bent to the will of the dominant species. Claire Jean Kim shows that racism is *zoological* in nature – it works by reducing Black people to the status of animals. But that hierarchisation can only work if other animals are seen as without intrinsic worth and therefore open to the most horrendous treatment.

Understandably, racial-justice activists and scholars have usually responded to being animalised by denouncing the association and pushing

it out of sight. But the answer is not for people of colour to fight to join the top dogs (or should we say 'top humans'), but to interrogate the hierarchy itself. 'Deconstructing animality is not, as feared, a detour from racial liberation, but rather a crucial step along the path,' writes Kim.[7]

Aph Ko, author of the awesomely named book *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft*, calls instead for 'afro-zoological resistance' in response – racial resistance that centres on the question of the animal.

Since the 1970s and 80s, ecofeminists have similarly seen the oppression of non-human nature, women and colonised peoples as part of one and the same project, resulting from a concept of the human as 'man the hunter'. The consolidation of states, and much later capitalist nation-states, was indispensable in the long process of producing this kind of human.

Because, as Sylvia Wynter points out, it's not *all* humans who are responsible for the environmental catastrophe which we find ourselves in, it's not humanity *per se*. It's a certain kind of human – most recently *homo economicus,* who reduces humans to calculators of economic worth. Wynter is part of a lineage of Black radical thinkers, from W.E.B. Du Bois to Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, who have striven to find a new kind of humanism, one that is, in Césaire's words, 'made to the measure of the world'.[8]

Wynter explains that humans don't *have* to be destroyers and exploiters. The one thing that does distinguish humans from other animals is that we are both a biological *and* a cultural species. We are a species of flesh and blood but also of storytelling. Our storytelling capacity originates in Blackness, in the Blombos Cave in South Africa where the first cave drawing was found, dating back 73,000 years.

So far we have disavowed the cultural aspect of our being – *homo economicus* pretends we have no choice, we are hardwired to be selfish, greedy individualists. But we can reclaim this part of ourselves to tell new stories, create a new human that is made to the measure of the interlocking structural crises we now face.

Against race, Paul Gilroy has called for a new 'planetary humanism' where everyone has the right to be human. But in our current time we need to expand this category, both inwards to recognise all species on Earth as of worth, and outwards beyond our planet. This is not the sort of humanism that solves the problem of environmental devastation by asteroid mining or colonising other planets, as the Elon Musks of the world would have it, repeating the same processes of extraction and colonisation that got us into this mess in the first place.

Let's call it an 'intergalactic humanism', in which Earthlings, in our infinite variety, can live well together within the boundaries of what our planet can allow, and in peace with our cosmic neighbours.

Compass

Building back better, for real

Of course, our new intergalactic humanism will need corresponding socio-political entities, just as nationalism has the nation-state.

We don't need to look very far to get to some pretty promising possibilities. Ecofeminist Maria Mies has advocated the 'subsistence perspective'[9], with economies organised on a relatively smalls cale and focused on reproductive work – what are now recognised as the 'essential services' that are frequently carried out by women and people of colour, including all kinds of care work and the production of food. Instead of production for profit, economies would be needs-based, environmentally sustainable, cooperative and local.

Democratic confederalism, theorised by the imprisoned Kurdish revolutionary Abdullah Öcalan and practiced with extraordinary success in Rojava in north-eastern Syria, and the Zapatistas in the Chiapas region of Mexico, give a taste of how such societies can work. Both are built around local direct democracies, which are linked up with each other for cooperation on larger-scale issues. This concept of democracy includes economic democracy, where the means of life are held in the hands of society, not corporations or the state. In both cases, women are at the heart of the movement, and women's rights are enshrined in their constitutions and embedded in their political structures. And both face constant threat of extinction from the Turkish and Mexican nation-states.

In the Indian context, Ashish Kothari advances an alternative framework for human development and organisation which he calls Radical Ecological Democracy (RED) – also anchored in currently existing practices. This combines localisation with bioregionalism – an alternative to the nation-state that is also popular among anarchists in the US and elsewhere.

A bioregion is a continuous geographic area with unique natural features in terms of terrain, climate, soil, watersheds, wildlife and human settlements. Bioregions are based in environmental concerns and don't recognise the arbitrary boundaries of the nation-state. Instead of centralised management, they are more conducive to decentralised direct democracy and mutual aid in the stewardship of regional environments. Again, bioregions can be confederated with each other for larger-scale cooperation.

The boundaries of communities or bioregions don't have to be hard borders restricting movement because economies would be organised around caring and sharing rather than competition over the means of life. People wouldn't be forced to move through the pilfering of resources, allowing the free flow not of capital but of people and ideas. No more nations, no more class, no more race.

Compass

Freedom of choice

If it's relatively easy to reject the idea of nations and even easier to reject race, then what about other ideas of 'peoples', like cultures or ethnicities – should we reject those too? Intergalactic humanist bioregionalism is all well and good, but aren't humans by nature 'tribal'? Isn't ethno-nationalism so irresistible precisely because it resonates with a universal human need for these kinds of group identities?

The calls for a left patriotism seem to be based at least in part on this assumption – including that of Britain's most lovable progressive patriot, George Orwell.[10] (Another assumption behind such calls seems to be the elitist notion that most people aren't capable of thinking or feeling beyond nationalism.)

And after all, I have been talking about the Kurdish freedom movement and the Zapatistas who were mainly drawn from the Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Tojolabal Maya-speaking communities. Aren't these anti-capitalist political projects based precisely around ethnicity?

This is a quandary for many anti-racists and anti-capitalists who want to refuse all kinds of essentialism, including the idea that cultures or ethnicities are somehow fixed, but who want to support decolonial movements defending their ethnic identities.

But actually, a closer look at democratic confederalism and Zapatismo shows that they aren't necessarily based on ethnic essentialism. David Graeber observed in 2004 that it was the international media that framed the Zapatistas as an ethnic group, not the movement itself[11]: 'Rather than a band of rebels with a vision of radical democratic transformation, they were immediately redefined as a band of Mayan Indians demanding indigenous autonomy'. The Rojava project is consciously multi-ethnic, including not only Kurds but Arabs, Christians, Turkmens, Chechens, Armenians, Syriacs, Assyrians and others. In fact, democratic confederalism has argued that our collective identities should be based on our ethics not our ethnicities.

As Graeber points out, so many of our identities are forced upon us. No person whose racialisation is a means for extraction is ever allowed to forget their racial identity. Are our own identities not what we ultimately want to be able to choose? Maybe there is a basic human need for belonging and group identity on a more intimate level than humanism on its own can offer. But we should be free to choose those groups and identities ourselves and not have them foisted on us. That means creating spaces free from domination and exploitation where we are able to experiment with doing that – which is exactly what many decolonial projects are trying to do.

Instead of trying to salvage tired, broken ideas like nationalism, by combining a new humanism with spaces free from hierarchy where we can

Compass

experiment with belonging and identity we can offer so much more to so many of us who also feel tired and broken and have had enough. Because all we all really want is to feel safe and loved and like we belong and we matter – even that kid who used to sing racist football chants at me at school.

Endnotes

1. A version of this was orginally published in OpenDemocracy.
2. Fraser, N, (2014), Behind Marx's Hidden Abode, New Left Review 86
3. Kvangraven, I, (2020) If we want to tackle global inequality, we need better economic theories, OpenDemocracy
4. See here, Screpanti, E (2014), *Global Imperialism and the Great Crisis: The Uncertain Future of Capitalism*, Monthly Review
5. Basu, L, (2019) Decolonising the economy, OpenDemocracy
6. The Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, (2020), Preparing for the end of the world as we know it, OpenDemocracy
7. Ko, A, (2019), *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft*, Lantern
8. Césaire, A, (2001) *Discourse on Colonialism*, Monthly Review
9. Mies, M, (1986) *Patriarchy and Accumulation On A World Scale*, Zed Books
10. Whittaker, J (2020) A brief history of progressive patriotism, Prospect Magazine
11. See here Graeber, D (2004) *Fragments of a Anarchist Anthropology*, Prickly Paradigm Press

Compass

Nationalism is the Progressive's Friend – Even for England

Robin McAlpine

If you think of yourself as a leftie, a progressive or whatever you want to call it then I urge you to embrace nationalism and learn to love borders. I know, I know, many of you will recoil at the suggestion – but you shouldn't. It's not only that the alternatives are much worse, it's that I believe that if you think it through carefully these things will come to make a lot of sense to you.

Let me begin by assuming that if you're reading this you are not in favour of imperialism, theocracy or fascism and that if you hope for anarcho-syndicalism you're not banking on it coming along any time soon. You may favour a European super-state but that doesn't change the argument (I'll come to that). And you may also think 'that's easy to say because Scottish nationalism is not like English nationalism', but neither are particularly different, and neither are particularly unusual (I'll come to that too). On the other hand, you should have deep fears about populism and a deep suspicion about patriotism.

Let me start with a fast definition of each of these terms. Nationalism is the belief that society should be organised on the basis of a defined territory which gives equal rights to any citizen living in that territory including the right to choose how they are governed. Populism has nothing whatsoever to do with popularity but is based on the root word 'populace' – because populism is about the way you manipulate that populace. It is the practice of dividing a population up into an in-group and an out-group and convincing the in-group that the problem is the out-group (the in-group is usually the majority group but there are some examples of minority populism). This is a means of social control.

Patriotism is a loyalty to institutions rather than to concepts. No-one describes themselves as being patriotic to democracy or to fellow citizens. Patriotism is always upwards-looking, usually linked to militarism and an acceptance of some version of 'my country right or wrong' – which is telling because a country can't be 'wrong', only its government. Yes, these are greatly truncated definitions, but they help.

Or, to put it another way, nationalism is 'us not them', populism is 'you and me, not him/her' and patriotism is 'us for them'. Let me start by ruling out populism as an option for anyone progressive. I'm all for many of the political and campaigning tactics which these days get called populism, but that's because the term is badly misapplied. Being pissed off and blaming the people who run the economy or make decisions about your life (the

'elite') is not populism in any meaningful way, it is legitimate criticism. And no-one is suggesting that these 'elites' should be treated as inferior or a different category of person, they're just being held to account for their actions. Real populism is government-through-hatred, inventing fake human-shaped problems to prevent people from focusing on the real problems in their society and their real causes.

So what about patriotism? The leader of the Labour Party has strained sinews to project his patriotism. Is this not a respectable idea? I don't think so. Claiming to be proud of an institution irrespective of its actions seems dangerous to me. Being 'proud of our armed forces' if they are doing bad things is a perverse position to take. You can be proud of individual soldiers who sacrifice for us, but that is empathy rather than patriotism. Patriotism is unconditional and our support for institutions should always be conditional. Or to put it another way, you really can't be a 'patriotic dissident' and a characteristic which precludes dissent is not to be trusted; 'I'm patriotic but...' doesn't make any sense.

Of course, you will be quite likely to have a preconceived set of ideas about what nationalism is, but you might want to look again at where those ideas stem from. There are two general sources. The first is the original Romantic ideal of a folk tradition which represents a homeland to which you feel attracted. But it is worth noting that this developed largely in response to imperialism. This was not an era of democratic nation-states and nationalism was often a cry of rebellion against the brutality of invasion and colonisation. The second source is the immediate post-war era, but that is a distorting mirror.

It is much better to get away from these historically specific understandings of nationalism and take as the starting point Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities'.[1] Such is the recoil from the concept of nationalism that this term is often taken to be a pejorative (as if it means 'fake communities'). It isn't; all but the very smallest of communities exist only on the basis of a degree of imagining because we just don't live in village communities anymore and so people do not all know each other. We imagine shared connections because of shared interests and shared conditions.

Nationalism is a neutral concept. Of course, there is 'bad nationalism', but mostly these are the results of elected governments, which mean there must be 'bad democracies'. There are; it isn't an argument against democracy. So let's turn to the idea of borders for a second. The hostility to borders is purely a fashion. A border is nothing more and nothing less than the place where the rules change. There are borders between local authorities and we may pay different council tax or have different planning guidelines on either side but these are not acts of hatred. Indeed, the entire concept of 'hard borders' is a terrible misdirection. There is no such thing; all borders are degrees of hard and soft according to what is crossing them and where they came from. My partner is not white so please don't tell me that the UK border is 'soft' for people with the right

Compass

passport because I've never once been pulled aside and questioned, and she has. The entire concept of a 'hard border' was invented as part of the Remain campaign; talk to a policy expert in borders and customs and they will tell you there is no such thing.

It's just the place where laws change. So if you want responsive laws (i.e., if you don't want one consistent law everywhere) there will be borders and from there everything else is a negotiation. And in any case borders have another very important role: they create a demos, a body of people who have democratic rights. If you believe that people have a right to change their society you need a demos to make that decision – and the second you do there is a border of some sort. The belief that deciding tax rates or regulation at a continent-wide scale is a better form of democracy is something you may wish to argue, but in that case the continent is just acting like a nation-state. There is then a border between it and the next continent. Personally, I believe a democracy is better when it is closer to people and better reflects their interests, their will, their hopes. Even a European super-state would presumably have some element of local democracy so again, we're simply negotiating.

The 'us, not them' of nationalism is treated as if it's an act of hate. It isn't, it just means we don't impose our schedule of public holidays on France or our school curriculum on the Netherlands. It can be an act of hate, but that's not nationalism but politics. And it could be based on ethnic characteristics, but that's not nationalism but populism. In the end there is no democracy without a demos, there is no meaningful demos without a border and to date there is no meaningful governmental border which isn't a nation-state (or which will not effectively become one once you create it – culture shapes itself around reality as much as it changes it).

In the end I think of nationalism as a 'trade union for the people' (as opposed to just the workers). History is the tale of the abuse of power by people capable of imposing force on others. It has never been easy for individuals to tame or resist that force and I would hope no-one is going to defend the brutalities of empires and kingdoms. The nation-state created a way for ordinary people to come together and resist great powers and that is something we need now more than ever. All the love of localism in the world won't regulate corporations, change your monetary policy or be able to negotiate with other nation states. The fight isn't against nationalism but the politics of the nation. Blaming the concept for the actions of people is a mistake. It isn't nationalism that created Brexit, it was voters (and our beloved 'free press'...).

So I'm reducing the concept to civic nationalism then? No, I'm not. There is a strange tendency among some on the left to be ashamed of what they view as sentimental, meaningless cultural symbols of the past. This is, for me, most certainly the wrong strand of left thinking. The culture of ordinary people has always been passed down and we're the richer (and luckier) for it. The last place I want to end up is some giant global shopping mall where culture is simply a purchase option and where there is a small

Compass

archive through the back where you can bring your anthropological curiosity to those sentimental folk tales and songs. They are not just an expression of sentiment, they are a commitment to place. It is no coincidence that these folk traditions are the roots of environmentalism. The world is not on fire because of nationalism and if you pay attention to the environmental movement you'll discover that it is people rooted to and committed to the place they live which largely drive it. They want to save the world because they want to save their home and vice versa. Globalists mock this, but they're a much bigger problem than nationalists.

While I could expand this argument a long, long way, let's for the sake of argument say I've convinced you at least a little. You may now be saying 'but you're from Scotland, your nationalism is different from ours in England'. No, it's not. Of course, there are some specific characteristics; as a 'small neighbour' our nationalism was always more likely to 'punch up' and as the dominant partner England's nationalism has been a little more likely to 'punch down'. And yes history brings distinctive elements – our sparse population has made us culturally more inclined to welcome strangers (though of course that welcome, regrettably, is often greater the more the stranger looks like us), our Wars of Independence created a much more egalitarian political culture and our 20th century reinforced that with a kind of social solidarity. Perhaps above all, in the last 50 or 60 years Scotland's middle classes were much more likely to identify with the working classes (given how many first-generation middle class people we had) and from Thatcher onwards your middle classes (with their *Daily Mail*s) seemed to aspire more to identify with the upper classes, to be more ashamed of working-class roots. But you can find all the contrary trends in Scotland and all the same trends in England. England's left sometimes strike me as feeling unnecessarily ill about your own culture because of selective editing by the other side.

In the end what is different is not culture, not nationalism, but politics. When we had a lot of Irish immigration in the 20th century we had hatred and discrimination, but we've not had anything like the kinds of immigration that parts of England have had. We have a different economy, we don't have a dominant capital city in the same way and we have a very different media landscape. Thatcher sealed the deal; she deindustrialised us and we suffered. It connected us back to our collectivism and sense of solidarity. The same happened in the North of England, but the North didn't get its own Parliament to create an outlet for that anger, to create more of a sense of 'future in your own hands'. It was a terrible mistake for England not to decentralise in the early New Labour years and I believe firmly Labour is now paying the price for that.

Frankly, the people who run progressive political parties in England seem to me to be quick to blame nationalism for failures which are neither cultural nor national but political. If you won't reform the media when you're in power, don't blame the media, blame yourself. If you serially ignore the North, don't bleat when you lose it.

Compass

But this is not the end for English nationalism. Some awful confluence of football violence and self-hatred is not your final destination and your fear of nationalism is what is leaving you stuck with this underdeveloped sense of your nation and its cultures. I know, because Scotland was in precisely the same place.

In the 1970s someone wearing a kilt at a wedding in Scotland would be making a point; by the 1990s anyone NOT wearing a kilt at a wedding would have assumed to have bad legs. A Scottish wedding is a flurry of tartan that we don't even think about anymore, we just enjoy. How did this happen? Because we went through a long and painful debate. Is Scotland a real country? Does it have a living culture? Should we be ashamed? In the 1980s we struggled painfully with what may look like small matters – was *Taggart* a source of pride or a national shame? Of course, it was just a decent TV programme, no more, no less. But questions like this were the location of a battle inside our own souls. One side was just 'couthy sentimentality' and the other was the 'Caledonian Cringe' when we began. And so we fought it out within ourselves and between ourselves. But we came out the other end. In 1990 the question of Scottishness was largely settled. A load of private-school boys and small-c conservative farmers marched onto a pitch at Murrayfield and sang 'Flower of Scotland' like their lives depended on it. And we took the Grand Slam from an over-entitled English team that took us for granted. At that moment Scotland stopped being that debate, it was just a thing you were, a place you lived. Some of those players went on to be leading figures in the No Campaign during Scotland's independence referendum and one thing we all agreed was that this had no impact whatsoever on their Scottishness. We just were.

A few years ago Emily Thornberry tweeted a picture of a house in England covered in St George's Crosses. There were no words attached, and yet it created a fury and a conflict. I looked and I realised something – this was an early, prominent example of the 'English Cringe', the sceptical side of the debate about whether the symbols of your nation were a matter of pride or shame. But I realised something else – you didn't have a word for it, almost like you didn't really know it was happening. The debate you have had since has been just like the debate in Scotland during that period in the 1980s when so much heat was generated. But I'm not completely sure you know you're going through the same thing and I'm not sure both sides want to get through to the other side of it. If only progressives could embrace their nationalism and fight the fight of what your nationalism is, you too could all be wearing St George's Cross waistcoats at your weddings (or whatever) without anyone making any assumption about what that means about your personal politics. It's just that you won't get there when the leader of your main progressive party completely misunderstands what is really going on and wastes his time making speeches about his love for the army.

I wish you well on your ongoing journey. It never ends – we're debating it

all in Scotland again. But it really can get better and you really can find genuine love for things you fear today.

Endnotes

1. Anderson B (2016) *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso

Compass

Emanicaption from the Bottom-up: Is Radical Municipalism What We're Looking For?

Laura Roth

Nationalism and right-wing projects are growing in a context of disaffection with traditional representative institutions. This is true for the UK as it is the case for many other countries, not only in Europe. In that context, the left feels lost. Social democrats are putting most of their efforts into defending those representative and technocratic institutions that people no longer trust, with little success. And the radical left use discourses that many people cannot connect with. The left–right divide does not seem to be enough to motivate the masses in a context where people do not trust representatives and institutions that would be in charge of implementing those agendas in the first place. Right-wing populism is becoming a successful strategy because it is shifting its discourse from traditional discussions around freedom and social welfare to debates over who has a voice in collective matters: the people against the elite.

In such a scenario, Chantal Mouffe argues that:

> "instead of excluding *a priori* the voters of right-wing populist parties as necessarily moved by atavistic passions, condemning them to remain prisoners of those passions forever, it is necessary to recognize the democratic nucleus at the origin of many of their demands I do not deny that there are people who feel perfectly at home with those reactionary values, but I am convinced there are others who are attracted to those parties because they feel they are the only ones that care about their problems".[1]

Her diagnosis of the problem fits the analysis of people like Ronald Inglehart or Pippa Norris[2], who have been arguing for years that the reality is not that people do not support democracy (surveys like the World Values Survey say they do!), but that they do not want the democracy they have: liberal representative democracies where people vote every X years and in the meantime are expected to be silent (or to protest, but not too much). In addition, Mouffe suggests that a good leftist counter-strategy to the right-wing rise is based on formulating peoples' "sentiments of being left behind and their desire for democratic recognition" in a new vocabulary and constructing "the people" through a progressive discourse.

Put in different terms, it seems obvious that the political culture is

Compass

relevant in discussions about the future of our democracies. And that this culture has been shifting towards more emancipatory values in recent decades, in addition to those associated with the left–right divide, which still exists, but is not the only game in town anymore. This trend is contributing to the rise of the extreme right and progressives need to figure out how to include emancipatory values in their discourses and practices.

There are at least two ways for the left to address this problem. One of them is to do it from the top down by embracing leftist populism, as Mouffe suggests. In the global North this has been a tempting strategy for social democrats in some countries (e.g., Corbyn in the UK or Sanders in the US) and also a project for new parties in some others (e.g., Iglesias in Spain and Tsipras in Greece). In the global South countless examples can also be found, especially in Latin America (e.g., Kirchner in Argentina or Chávez in Venezuela). The other alternative is to seek emancipation from the bottom up. I will argue that building power from below is more desirable, and that radical municipalism (not municipal socialism!) shows us a promising path.

What is radical municipalism?

Also known as new municipalism, this political strategy focuses on the local level as the privileged arena for political change. The reason is not that this would allow existing political parties to gain popular support or to implement policies that they cannot implement by acting from other levels of government. It is that the proximity that we find in the local level (the neighbourhood, the town, the city) allows us to do politics in a different way that is more democratic, more feminist and more able to repoliticise dissenchanted people.

Although municipalism is always connected to the local level, different uses of the word can be currently identified.[3] Some people think of the term as simply meaning the autonomy of local civil society, from the capitalist system, including the state. They promote this by building coops, urban gardens, local movements, etc. Some others think it means focusing on the local level of government, but without changing anything other than the policies that are implemented. To them, municipalism means progressive local government. Between these two extremes is where new municipalism is able to demonstrate its radical character: in sustaining autonomous institutions and structures, occupying the local state, and building new ways of sharing power.

Those defending autonomous municipalism can say that their strategy is better because it allows them to really build power from the bottom up, with ordinary people. They usually argue that once you start interacting with the local state, you lose your autonomy, your energy, your vision. That you fall into the trap of "politics as usual". As a reply, new municipalists argue that there are many things that cannot be done if you do not engage with the local state. The key question is how to engage

Compass

with that scary apparatus, and the proposal is to seize it and change it. To transform it into an open structure that is truly democratic and not based on representative democracy anymore.

Defenders of municipalism as progressive local government can argue that acting from the local state is far more effective than acting from the streets and the community, and that they actually know better what to do and how to do it. Nevertheless, they know their legitimacy comes from those streets and the community, so they look for ways to collaborate, and to invite people to participate. But in the end, this *participation-washing* does not usually touch the center of decision-making power,[4] which remains in the hands of public officials.[5] This is why new municipalists argue that the local state needs to be reformed and the relationship with the community needs to be reframed. Again, power should be shared through radically democratic structures, which allow politics to be done in a way that departs from the liberal representative tradition.

In practice, radical municipalism means things such as: 1) creating citizen platforms by joining forces with local movements, collectives, small political parties and citizens; 2) running for elections and seizing local institutions; 3) implementing new democratic decision-making structures that are open and horizontal, and sharing the power of representatives (including municipalists) and local bureaucracies; and 4) designing decision-making structures that help sustain the autonomy of the movements and of the community, but also make sure that they have an impact on the local state.

Why radical municipalism?

A lot more can be said about what municipalism is, how it can be implemented, which challenges it faces, its limits, and so on (I will mention a few of them in the conclusion). But now I want to go back to the question of why municipalism is a good idea in terms of fostering an emancipatory way of doing politics.

The first reason, which is also frequently mentioned by radical municipalists, is that municipalism has the potential of uniting and mobilising people around concrete issues despite other differences that might separate them. Traditionally, the way politicians connect with people is through references to the nation, identity, class or a shared enemy. The reason is that when trying to emotionally mobilise people at the level of the state, few issues are able to address great numbers of individuals and make them feel included. This is typically the strategy of populism (including leftist versions of it): it discursively tries to reach the majority of the population by referring to the things these people share, in spite of their differences. Hegemony is the name that framework receives. Talking about "the people" vs. "elites" has been the traditional strategy, but also references to the nation are frequent in practice and are defended by populist theorists such as Laclau. In recent months, the "war against Covid-19" is another example of a strategy to motivate

Compass

citizens. The war against terrorism, against immigration, or real wars have also been very common.

At the local level other kinds of strategies are much easier to implement and thus using an us vs. them discourse is not always necessary. People can discuss whether to build public housing or not or whether to restrict traffic or not without having to appeal to elements such as nationality or a war against someone/something. And they can also easily agree on some issues and disagree on others. If interactions happen frequently, they learn that disagreement and agreement are part of politics and that can be processed in a way that sustains a strong democracy. An interesting story of how such a different political culture is being cultivated in the UK can be found in some indie towns, which are part of the Flat Pack Democracy campaign for the local elections 2021.

A second reason in favour of municipalism is intimately connected to the previous one. Although the local level is not necessarily more democratic[6], compared to others, it is far easier to build participatory decision-making structures, compared to other levels of government. This is maybe the reason why local governments of all political colours have implemented participation mechanisms in their cities and towns in recent decades. Nevertheless, their aim has usually been to legitimise those in government and to get information about people's preferences. Not to really share power and democratise the local state. The kind of democracy that municipalism is seeking is a strong participatory democracy that, to a great extent, takes the place of representative institutions and political parties. It also aims to cut the dependency from other levels of government and to make local self-government the basis of confederated/networked democracies. A real democracy, where ordinary people actually have a say, is more easily implemented by starting from the local scale.[7] Such open and power-sharing structures are not only intrinsically desirable, because they give real decision-making power to people, but also instrumentally positive, because they help nurture a political culture where citizens are subjects and not objects of politics. And this is the centerpiece of emancipatory politics.

Finally, a third reason is connected to a feminist conception of politics. Feminism has been gaining momentum in recent years, but feminising politics cannot simply mean having more women in positions of responsibility and power. As Joni Lovenduski wrote many years ago, this is problematic because women receive a double punishment: when they do not act according to masculine stereotypes, and also when they do not act according to feminine stereotypes.[8] In addition, such a project of achieving gender balance is problematic because it forgets about many other groups intersecting (or not) with women that are also relatively excluded from political decision-making, based on their inability to fit the masculine patriarchal role of the politician. In the municipalist movement, feminizing politics means sharing power and building it through cooperation instead of confrontation, democratising decision-making, paying special attention

to care and relationships, non-violence, supporting feminist styles of leadership and making sure diversity is promoted in political organising. These aims are more easily achieved, again, at the local level, through relatively small organisations that can work on the basis of face-to-face relationships. Regional or national political organisations such as political parties are much harder to feminise in that stronger sense.

Conclusions

Radical municipalism faces a number of serious obstacles, such as the lack of competences and resources of local governments (why bother with seizing an institution that has no power?), the difficulty of having people winning elections on day one only to give up that power and share it on day two (why not use that power to implement a progressive agenda using existing institutional tools?), mobilising people to campaign and to participate in politics (why not have politicians do the work?), having an impact beyond the city or town (after all, do we not want to change the world?), changing local institutions without the legal powers or political majorities (how can we change decision-making rules if those rules are created by, for example, national governments?), etc.

Nevertheless, let me make a few final comments. First, some of these challenges can be met by experimentation and the design of new political strategies. Creativity has a key role to play here, because if we want to change the framework we live in we need to first imagine alternative ones. For instance, local governments can do several things in addition to acting within their competences: solve problems that are no-one's competence, unite with other local governments and mobilise for change trans-locally (e.g., to resist states, to resist transnationals, etc.), they can communicate in a different way and help change the political agenda, etc. Municipalist platforms can be smart in developing decision-making structures that force those within the institution to share power and stay accountable once elections are won. People can be mobilised in non-traditional ways and be convinced of the importance of campaigning and participating in politics. Pressure to change institutions, competences and resource distribution can come from the streets and does not need to rely on (local) public representatives convincing other (e.g., state) public representatives.

But even if these obstacles are real and might need a long time to be addressed, municipalism still offers an interesting alternative to traditional politics. It has the potential of supporting a more democratic political culture that addresses the desire to have a say in politics, of addressing political disaffection and of generating towns and cities that are worth living in. Other traditional strategies based on state-centered institutions might be attractive and promise to offer short-term solutions in terms of economic reform. But they will not be able to touch the core of the problem: how politics is done in a non-democratic way in the first place. Maybe it is time to try out something new if we want to achieve different results. But sustaining big political parties and winning elections

Compass

in order to then make political decisions on behalf of citizens remains an attractive aim for progressive politicians. The question is: is anyone ready to seize power (starting locally) and to share it?

More readings about municipalism

- Álvarez, I. (2020) "A reflection by the social leg of transformative municipalism", Minim Magazine
- Bookchin, M. (2015) *The Next Revolution. Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*, Verso.
- Rondelez, P. and Medina, C. (2020) "Limits of municipalism. What can we Learn from Operación Chamartín?", Minim Magazine
- Roth, L. and Russell, B. (2019) "Translocal Solidarity and the New Municipalism", Roar Magazine.
- Roth, L. and Stokfiszewski, I. (2020) "Municipalist Politics and the Specter of Emancipation", Roar Magazine
- Russell, B. (2019) "Beyond the Local Trap: New Municipalism and the Rise of the Fearless Cities", Antipode, Vol. 51, Issue 3
- Zárate, L. (2020) "Pandemic Lessons, Progressive Politics. Right to the City and new Municipalism in Times of Covid-19", Minim Magazine

Endnotes

1. Mouffe, C (2019) *For A Left Populism*, Verso
2. Norris, P (1999) *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, Oxford University Press
3. Some deeper reflections about models of municipalism can be found in Roth, L, (2019), "(New) Municipalism", in Peters, M.A. and Heraud, R., Springer Encyclopedia of Educational Innovation, Springer; Roth, L (2020), "Municipalismo y democracia", in Roth, L., Calleja, A. and Monterde, A., Ciudades democráticas. La revuelta municipalista en el ciclo post-15M; Thompson, M., "What's so new about new municipalism?", Progress in Human Geography, 1-26
4. An interesting study of how local governments incentivise participation without sharing power can be found in the book by Baiocchi and Ganuza (2016) *Popular Democracy. The Paradox of Democracy*, Stanford University Press
5. To what extent local institutions do actually hold power in centralised countries is another issue, also relevant for municipalism, but that I won't touch in this text.
6. Purcell, M (2006) Urban Democracy and the Local Trap, *Urban Studies*, volume: 43, issue: 11
7. Although citizen assemblies, where people are selected by lottery and deliberate about key issues, is also a wonderful device to introduce decision-making not based on elections and political parties into existing institutional frameworks. Such a device is perfectly compatible with municipalist democracy.
8. Lovenduski, J (2005) *Feminizing Politics*, Wiley

Compass

Afterword:
A flag is a simple thing

Neal Lawson

A flag is a simple thing – some colours and shapes on a piece of cloth. But its symbolic, cultural and personal meaning is incredibly deep and complex. A flag means so many things in so many ways, so differently to so many people. The sight of it can induce pride or fear. It can be waved for good or evil.

Progressives can love or hate debates about nationalism, patriotism, identity and belonging – but no serious political project can now avoid them. The debate is here now and reveals so much about what is wrong with our society and what can be put right.

I've largely avoided the nationalism question for all my political life. In part because I am a rootless, from-nowhere cosmopolitan. But while that mayb e my dominant sense of self, it is not the whole truth. Like most people, I'm complex. Yes, I occupy a space of ideas and concepts – often at a global level. But I'm also from a working-class South London home. Not Crystal Palace or Millwall, mind you, but Charlton – if Bexleyheath is close enough to make that claim. I've not lived there for years – but it's where my soul is. The semi-detached suburbs on the green-field edges of London are more me than anywhere I've lived since or ever will live. I'm proud of that place and I can be proud of England and Britain, just as I can be ashamed. But I've shied away from nationalism debates because I hate exceptionalism. I love people and places that are not South London, England or Britain. We are different in some things, better and worse. But our common humanity overshadows any cultural or historical particulars.

The other reason I've avoided the debate is because I never knew what to do about it – what laws do you pass to engender the right kind of belonging? But such avoidance is no longer good enough. We had better find out what we want.

We had better find out because the stakes are now so very high – their highest since the 1930s. The exceptionalist form of nationalism is taking place for two reasons. The first is because our democratic system isn't working for enough of the people enough of the time. If they cannot find security and freedom in democracy then eventually they will look elsewhere. Many are. That isn't because they are stupid or racist – though some mayb e – it's because democracy and politics has been subordinated to the market. This is the deliberate intention and purpose of neoliberalism. The eradication of politics and democracy as a meaningful way to run society. In the formulation of the late Zygmunt Bauman, who

wasn't from South London but would have loved it there, 'power has been separated from politics and politics from power'.

But people also instinctively know that it's not just a case of going back to the old democracy as it was, in part because of globalisation and in part because of technology. The idea of democracy as just a vote every four years for someone else you don't really know to do politics *for you* and *to you* is over. People have a sense of information, power and agency now, through technology, which leaves old politics for dead. We need and can have a new and deeper local, sectoral, regional, national and global democracy – if we have the wit, wisdom and ambition to create it.

The right know this – they know we stand on the verge of a new democratic era – and they want to extinguish that possibility through populism and nativism. They want people to blame someone else and look for a strong man or woman – to take them back to a mythical golden age. And the way they get that is through borders and someone to blame. Forty years of rampant free-market globalisation – accelerated by parties of the left and the right – have summoned the spectre of national populism. Or, to put it another way: it's partly our fault. We have been so bad we paved the way for Trump, Johnson and Farage.

The answer isn't to try and copy their warped view of markets or nationalism – we can never outrun them on their terrain. We can't and we shouldn't even try because it is morally wrong. Means can never be justified by ends. Instead, we need to do three things. First, we must build a new democracy – one that gives people real meaning in their neighbourhoods and places, where they work, the services they use and nationally. We would never have had Brexit if we had had proportional representation. In 2015 almost four million voters were totally ignored – and it came back to bite us. But we need to go deeper with citizens assemblies, Home Rule for the four nations of the UK, a progressive regionalism and much more given the technology at hand.

Secondly, we have to embrace globalisation. There will be no local or national self-determination without global self-determination. This used to sound far-fetched but no longer does. Covid-19 reveals a world that is deeply interconnected. We are stuck in our homes because of a global event – and everyone now has a global consciousness because of this universal experience. The pandemic both locked us down and opened us up. Tax, jobs, migration and climate all demand a global response. Either there will be a race to the bottom or a new sense of global common good. Because of the pandemic we now feel this. Unless and until we reconnect power with politics then nativism will prevail. The corporations and the financial markets slipped the mooring of national democracy, but now through technology they can and must be re-anchored to society – only this time at a global level.

In a wonderful new book, *Planetary Politics*, Lorenzo Marsili writes:

Compass

"If we believe our politics is in crisis, that is because our imagination has stopped at the borders of the nation state and at a conception of the world that has now been surpassed by the very evolution of the world itself. We must put aside the mourning and imagine a new way of governing and influencing the extraordinary planetary interdependence we have achieved".

The third thing we must do is deploy a politics of both/and – not either/or. We are all from somewhere and nowhere. We all have complex lives, backstories and hopes. We can be proud of our country and our flag and care deeply for people we have never met and never will. Our humanity, love and generosity knows no borders nor limits. But to express the best in us demands levels of security that only society as a whole can offer. It won't be the 20th century security of a job for life or endless and often pointless consumption. It will be based on something like basic income, it will demand universal basic services, new systems of care, more time off from work and a green industrial and social revolution. It also means protecting the public realm – the parks and libraries and spaces where we are citizens, and the common institutions of a nation. This entails preserving old ones such as post offices and public broadcasting but also creating new ones – the digital networks and commons that will allow us to flourish in this century.

We can and must be local and global, determined to own and shape modernity for allwhile respectful of tradition and those who want to conserve the best parts of it. In Compass we talk about the Open Tribe because of our need to belong, but only if we are porous – willing to adapt, explore and reach out. Otherwise, we ossify and die. The right answer is hardly ever either/or but both/and. We can and should be as proud of Captain Tom as we are of Greta Thunberg.

This is the complex, rich and nuanced space we have to occupy to get our good society. It is a struggle between democracy or non-democracy, and we must win it.

COMPASS IS THE PRESSURE GROUP FOR A GOOD SOCIETY

We believe in a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build alliances of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen.

JOIN COMPASS TODAY action.compassonline.org.uk

Compass