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Europe and/or the UK: Post-Brexit urban and regional development futures – A special issue

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Abstract
It was over 25 years ago that European Urban and Regional Studies was launched at a time of epochal change in the composition of the political, economic and social map of Europe. Brexit has been described as an epochal moment – and at such a moment, European Urban and Regional Studies felt it should offer the space for short commentaries on Brexit and its impact on the relationships of place, space and scale across the cultural, economic, social and political maps of the ‘new Europes’. Seeking contributions drawing on the theories, processes and patterns of urban and regional development, the following provides 10 contributions on Europe, the UK and/or their relational geographies in a post-Brexit world. What the drawn-out and highly contested process of Brexit has done for the populace, residents and ex-pats of the UK is to reveal the inordinate ways in which our mental, everyday and legal maps of the regions, nations and places of the UK in Europe are powerful, territorially and rationally inconsistent, downright quirky at times but also intensely unequal. First, as the UK exits the Single Market, the nature of the political imagination needed to create alternatives to the construction of new borders and new divisions, even within a discourse of creating a ‘global Britain’, remains uncertain. European Urban and Regional Studies has always been a journal dedicated to the importance of pan-European scholarly integration and solidarity and we hope that it will continue to intervene in debates over what alternative imaginings to a more closed and introverted future might look like. Second, as the impacts of COVID-19 continue to change in profound ways how we think, work and travel across European space, we will need to find new forms of integration and new forms of engagement in intellectual life and policy development. European Urban and Regional Studies remains committed to forging such forms.

Keywords
Brexit, Europe, COVID-19, spatial relations, pan-European scholarship

It was over 25 years ago, ‘as a child of European integration’ (Hadjimichalis, 2020: 1), that European Urban and Regional Studies was launched ‘...at a time of momentous - maybe even epochal - change in the composition of the political, economic and social map of Europe’ (Sadler, 1994: 1). Since its initial launch, European Urban and Regional Studies has built its intention and record of ‘making a significant and substantial contribution to academic and policy debate related to processes of urban and regional development in the new Europes’ (Sadler, 1994: 2).
On 31 December 2020, at midnight Brussels time and 11 p.m. UK time, the transition period for the UK ‘exiting the EU’ ends. Brexit has been described as an epochal moment – certainly for the UK, its Devolved Administrations and regions and, potentially, for a changing Europe. At such an epochal moment, European Urban and Regional Studies felt it should offer the space for short commentaries on Brexit and its impact on the relationships of place, space and scale across the cultural, economic, social and political maps of the ‘new Europes’. Seeking contributions drawing on the theories, processes and patterns of urban and regional development, we issued an open call for short statements on Europe, the UK and/or their relational geographies in a post-Brexit world. The following Special Issue provides 10 such contributions.

For students of the ever-missed Doreen Massey, the 4 years since the vote to leave the EU have seen a ‘relational sense of UK/Europe as place and space’ writ large virtually daily in the UK. What the drawn-out and highly contested process of Brexit has done for the populace and residents of the UK is to reveal the inordinate ways in which our mental, everyday and legal maps of the regions, nations and places of the UK in Europe are powerful, territorially and rationally inconsistent, downright quirky at times but also intensely unequal. The island nation has seen that its territorial borders exist, for example, in France and Spain, in (the middle of?) the sea, in the historical, painful and scandalously managed legacies of ‘far flung’ islands and nations, and are overlain with complex mappings of citizenship and residency rights, identity, belonging and evermore, innumerable, multi-scalar networks and mobilities of the tangibles and intangibles of products, services and experiences built up through the long ages of European development. For the UK, disengagement and unravelling from the EU has quickly become a reality of myriad systems of relational engagement and re-imagining and re-engagement of discussions as (bits of) the UK has been imagined as the new Norway, Canada or Switzerland, amongst others, and as existing agreements on travel, health, finance, environment, social and labour rights, data, crime, as well as the more obvious trade and services have become more visible (and valued) as the everyday realities of EU membership.

Thus, as the first of our contributors (and a participant in the founding of European Urban and Regional Studies) Costis Hadjimichalis writes ‘space and geography’ were at the forefront of thinking at the outset of the journal, just as it should be now as we consider the potential development pathways of a new Europe ‘namely between seeking neoliberal macro-economic policies that impose austerity and competitiveness, and pursuing solidarity and economic and social cohesion via social and cohesion funds’ (Hadjimichalis, 2020: 5). Equally now as then, the challenge for urban and regional studies remains how to theorise persistent spatially unbalanced growth (in Europe) and to articulate what sort of policy response is called for.

Indeed, for several contributors (Hadjimichalis, Hudson, Petrakos and Sotiriou), it has been the inability and failure of European policy frameworks to manage the deep seated and continuing processes of uneven development in the European Union that has sowed the seeds of disintegration (Christiansen, 2020; Dijkstra et al., 2020). Reminding us that it was the Greek referendum of July 2015 against the bailout conditions set by the EU and International Monetary Fund (IMF) that first raised the significant spectre of European disintegration (Grexit), Petrakos and Sotiriou (2020) argue that a new policy agenda addressing the real weaknesses of the Union is inevitable if disintegration is to be avoided. Positively, they go on to argue that some elements of this new policy agenda for Europe (a Post-Covid-19 Recovery Plan?) may be emergent, including fiscal redistribution to enhance pan-European solidarity.

It is to the UK end of things, and the likely impact of Brexit on the socio-spatial inequalities of the ‘divided realm’ of the UK, that Hudson (2020) – an EURS founder – turns his insightful eyes. Whilst like other contributors recognising the immense challenges of Covid-19 to all the nation states of Europe, it is the deep historical roots of UK capitalism and imperialism, and structural imbalances amplified by a succession of central government policy choices over the last half century, that Hudson turns to in order to set the contemporary economic structure upon which the promised post-Brexit ‘levelling up’ UK development agenda will be delivered. Unfortunately, for Hudson, the prognosis is not good:
it seems to me more likely that these divisions will widen further as the UK economy is increasingly marginalised globally, increasingly detached from the EU and access to its markets, while remaining structurally imbalanced and dependent upon promoting the City of London as a global financial centre. Conversely, the ‘red wall’ and analogous areas will be at best the location of back offices, contact centres and warehouses providing poorly paid employment and at worst areas that are home to a surplus population, surplus to the labour-power requirements of both capital and state, dependent upon stretched and shrinking welfare budgets. (Hudson, 2020: 5)

Hudson does note, nevertheless, that policy initiatives to produce a more socially just and democratic society are to be welcomed. Yet if such a possibility is to be achieved, then it will require proven policy initiatives cogniscent of, and matched to, the governance context and frameworks of a post-Brexit UK. These are the subject of the next two papers in the Special Issue, by Giordano (2020) and Lagana (2020) respectively. Giordano argues that, the overall arguments about the impact of EU Cohesion Policy on European socio-spatial inequalities notwithstanding (Bachtler et al., 2019; Crescenzi and Giua, 2020), after several decades what is being dismantled in the UK is a well-developed governance system of regional policy, including strategic partnership working, multi-level governance relations and transparent, long-term budget allocations. His simple point is that, whatever may follow as part of the UK levelling-up agenda, there are significant policy lessons from our European experience which should inform the contours of future UK regional economic development policy. Lagana’s focus is how long term membership of the EU has both empowered, and disempowered, regions and sub-national governments across a number of dimensions. Overall, however, she notes how Brexit presents a number of disempowering issues for the UK’s territorial regions and nations. Able to take advantage of EU-inspired opportunity structures to bypass the centrality of UK government, she notes that a key political impact of Brexit will be ‘...how quickly regional and local economies will be able to shape and influence new opportunities structures coming from within the Union – if there are any’ (Lagana, 2020: 5).

The final five contributions move more directly to the specificities of the potential geographies and urban and regional development impacts of Brexit across European economies and societies. Henegan and Hall (2020) examine the implications of Brexit for the financial services sector and for conceptual understandings of finance in economic geography. At a European scale, they argue that Brexit is giving rise to a growing locational fragmentation of financial services to a range of European financial centres. In contrast, within the UK, their expectation is that finance is likely to become more concentrated in London as renewed processes of spatial concentration characteristic of previous economic shocks develop, alongside a lack of political agency within the UK’s periphery to resist change. Suggesting a process rather than a moment, Henigan and Hall (2020) argue for the distinct difference in dynamics – political and economic – which are shaping such impacts either side of the English Channel/La Manche.

It is to the cultural and creative sectors of Europe that Montalto et al. (2020) turn their attention. Increasingly recognised for their continued innovation and growth, and resilience to jobless automation, Montalto et al. utilise the European Commission’s Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor to show how UK cultural and creative cities have excelled in Europe. Yet what they show also is how such excellence has been strongly predicated on a creative non-national workforce, and whose mobility remains threatened by what evidence exists to date concerning post-Brexit immigration rules.

In highlighting labour migration to the UK, Montalto et al. identify what has been argued to be one of the major drivers for the UK’s Leave Vote (Burrell and Hopkins, 2019; Shipman, 2016). Markova and King’s contribution considers a relatively recent migrant group of scale to the UK under the EU’s freedom of movement principle, namely Bulgarians. Indeed, Bulgarian inward migration accelerated after the referendum, notwithstanding increased episodes of racist behaviour, hate speech and other forms of discrimination (Guma and Jones, 2019) and in the face of the suggestion of an expected Brexodus by EU migrants. Markova and King’s (2020) contribution suggests an active process of anchoring by those Bulgarian migrants who have been more successful to date, benefitting both themselves and the UK’s regional economies – but possibly not Bulgarian economy and society.
The free movement of capital, as well as labour, goods and services, is a further principle of EU membership. Moreover, foreign direct investment and a relatively open economy has been a (very) long-run characteristic of the UK economy, including the early and sustained choice of the UK regions by Japanese capital. As Cieślik and Ryan (2020) write, the UK is ranked as one of the top four largest recipient counties in the world for FDI since 1998 and, in 2017, Japanese firms accounted for 29% of all inward-UK foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows. Employing a dataset that extends to 2019, they investigate how the Brexit announcement has affected Japanese direct investment into Europe at the regional NUTS-2 level, including the UK regions. They identify two major conclusions. Firstly, in contrast to earlier work, they identify the significant negative impact Brexit has already had on Japanese direct investment flows and, secondly, citing path dependency at the regional level, they suggest Japanese FDI will continue to flow into the UK, mitigating to an extent Brexit’s negative impact on UK urban and regional development. However, the long-run consequences of Brexit will depend on the exact Brexit scenario.

Our final paper is concerned also with foreign investment – but of a different type – and which serves to highlight how the impacts of Brexit have already been shown to be unforeseen in many highly particular instances, yet far-reaching and with potentially life changing consequences. In ‘uncertain sunset lives’, Giner-Monfort and Haute (2020) detail what Brexit could mean for the UK’s Spanish Brexpats. As we write this introduction with one month to go to exit, and with no deal yet agreed, Giner-Monfort and Haute (2020) detail how the Spanish financial crisis, alongside Covid-19 and Brexit, have caused ‘...a feeling of uncertainty amongst Britons living in Spain, who see how everything they had previously taken for granted (in terms of freedom of movement, future prospects, lifestyle, etc.) is now being called into question’ (p. 5). In turn, the coastal enclaves of Spain face a loss of population, a decline in the building industry, and fewer taxes to provide health and social care to an ageing population and funds for a creaking welfare state.

Uncertainty is a fitting end to this introduction to the Special Issue in two senses. First, as the UK exits the Single Market and uncertainty remains for economic actors and citizens across the country and across the EU about the form that future relations will take, the nature of the political imagination needed to create alternatives to the construction of new borders and new divisions, even within a discourse of creating a ‘global Britain’, remains uncertain. European Urban and Regional Studies has always been a journal dedicated to the importance of pan-European scholarly integration and solidarity and we hope that it will continue to intervene in debates over what alternative imaginings to a more closed and introverted future might look like. Second, as the impacts of Covid-19 continue to change in profound ways how we think, work and travel across European space, we will need to find new forms of integration and new forms of engagement in intellectual life and policy development. European Urban and Regional Studies remains committed to forging such forms in such uncertain times over what our futures hold. Much more is yet to be written on Europe and/or the UK: Post-Brexit urban and regional development futures, but we hope this issue marks a conceptually and empirically rich intervention into how we might continue to understand a relational sense of UK/Europe as place and space – and as European Urban and Regional Studies itself follows and shapes debate around European urban and regional change as it embarks on a new stage in its lifecycle.

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Note
1. See, for example, Ritchie et al. (2019).

References


