

Does Brexit Herald a Re-assertion of the Nation-state?

Written by John Erik Fossum

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JOHN ERIK FOSSUM, MAR 7 2017

This question has a number of different aspects. One aspect pertains to what is meant by 're-assertion'. Another pertains to who and where such a re-assertion is taking place. Is it about the UK or the EU's member states, or both? Is it about the nation-state or either of the nation or the state? Does re-assertion refer to the physical manifestation of the nation-state or the re-assertion of its ideological salience? How are physical and ideological factors related? Is it a matter of states re-asserting themselves in relation to other states, or is the re-assertion a matter of domestic power struggles/reconfigurations?

A brief intervention cannot give justice to these complex issues. My intention here is to offer certain vantage-points or entries to a set of issues that are obviously important and that require a significant research effort.

Let me start with the notion of a reassertion of nation-states in an EU context. It is important to keep in mind that the EU was never intended to supersede the states that it is composed of. Neither is the EU institutional system separate from those states. States do not renege their sovereignty when entering the EU; they pool and share sovereignty (see Hooghe and Marks' 'Delegation and pooling in international organisations'). In a set of institutions over which they exercise far more direct control than is the case in any other federal-type political entity. Member states so-to-speak 'lend' the EU their stateness by the significant role they play in carrying out EU rules and regulations. This process is one in which member states authorize the EU to take action and, at the same time, also clearly constrain it from taking actions that they do not authorize it to undertake. That includes placing significant constraints on the EU's fiscal capacity. The particular balance of member states enabling and constraining EU action has shifted over time. Before the Euro-crisis the balance shifted towards the EU institutions; at present the EU undertakes even more tasks but certain member states greatly influence how that is done. In my view, from a behavioral (and not ideological) perspective, it is that balancing that we need to consider when discussing state re-assertion.

A second aspect pertaining to the EU refers to the impact that the EU has on national identities and state structures. The EU has contributed to 'extending' the reach of member states through joint decision-making (and resulting greater control of externalities). At the same time it has sought to curtail the space for national identities by various means of rendering nations more inclusive and less exclusively defining of the communities within which they exist. Put crudely, we may say that states and nations have developed in different directions: both have become de-territorialized, but while for nations that has meant reduced salience, the same cannot be said for states. When viewed from this perspective, a re-assertion of state control could mean further increases in control of external factors, or that state officials refocus their attention and increase their control of internal factors. Or a re-assertion of national identity could be the rise of narrow exclusive national identities, as we see across Europe. If such efforts gain control of the apparatuses of states a significant transformation will take place.

In the context of the UK, nation-state reassertion is an equally complex issue given that the UK is a pluri-national state and a former empire (see Keating's *Plurinational Democracy*). In state terms, re-assertion may refer to the UK as a whole; or it may refer to the re-assertion of the various portions of a fragmented UK (notably with Scotland departing from England or through a con-federalized UK). In nation terms the issue appears even more complex. Was the UK ever a nation? Or is national re-assertion an invented nostalgia or a mere ideological ploy – a means of ethnicizing a polity whose historical roots has induced it to globalism and cosmopolitanism as much as nationalism?

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These brief remarks suggest that when it comes to a re-assertion of nations, states or nation-states we may not see clear or uniform patterns, even if certain ideologically motivated actors would like to induce us to do precisely that. Nonetheless, we can identify certain lines of contention that will mark future struggles. With regard to internal aspects of re-assertion, we may see a reaffirmation of nationalism through significant changes in cleavage-structures and party configurations. Many of today's political parties have changed from mass parties to cartel parties (see Katz and Mair's 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy – The Emergence of the Cartel Party'). The former were typically socially well-embedded; the latter are characterized by being closely linked to states. To some extent parties have 'grown into the state'. This osmotic relationship generally marks the parties in government. These parties are also the ones most subject to the norm of responsibility; in today's world typically defined by states' international obligations. The implication is that they are often less directly responsive to voters' wishes and demands. The broader issue is that increased interconnectedness between states and their subjection to various international legal arrangements and agreements alter the manner in which parties balance responsibility and responsiveness (see Mair's 'Representative versus Responsible Government'). With the governing parties thus hemmed in, various opposition parties (often of a populist ilk) have a much freer hand to present themselves as responsive and claim to be the true champions of the people's will (however unsubstantiated such a claim may be).

Ethno-national movements were initially anti-statist and anti-EU. In recent years we have seen an important change: they have become warm defenders of welfare rights (for ethnic nationals, cf. welfare chauvinism) and a strong state (capable of controlling or curtailing immigration). They utilize transnational and supranational arrangements in their pursuits. The transnational reassertion of narrow, ethnic, nationalism is coupled with the ethno-nationalist discovery of the powers of the state, especially when it comes to socialization, disciplining and control. If such programs succeed and spread across the continent it is a moot point as to whether they will abolish the EU or redirect it to serve their aims. Their authoritarian inclinations do not bode well for democracy.

The picture is complex and composite but we see certain lines of contention emerging that will mark future struggles. How Brexit unfolds, whether it takes place in a relatively orderly and predictable manner, or whether it degenerates into a virtual garbage can of actors, problems and solutions will clearly affect the direction of outcomes. The same can be said about the effects of Brexit: whether it will fragment or consolidate the EU and/or the UK.

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