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Multi-level dynamics of the UK's EU exit: identity, territory, policy and power

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Abstract.

Introducing a multi-disciplinary special issue on the multi-level dynamics of the UK's EU exit, this article considers social science 'impact' from Brexit-related research, including the ESRC's UK in a Changing Europe initiative and Governance after Brexit programme. The issue draws on the initiative's Brexit Priority Grant programme, bringing together economists, political scientists, policy analysts and socio-legal scholars. It analyses the UK's regional and devolution-related Brexit dynamics. The article considers the potential and challenges of cross-disciplinary work and concludes with a critical analysis of the Johnson administration's 'levelling up agenda' in a post-Brexit and Covid/Covid-recovery context.

1. Introduction

This article introduces an interdisciplinary special issue on the UK's exit from the EU. Presented in two major sections – one on Politics and Institutions the other on Policy and the Economy – its analyses share a concern with spatial aspects and implications of Brexit, mostly conceived in terms of territoriality and/or regionalism. The collection draws on disciplinary fields of social science spanning psephology, territorial politics, socio-legal studies, policy analysis and regional and agricultural economics. Many of the contributions are based on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under an 'urgent' funding call – so-called 'Brexit Priority Grants' (BPGs) – associated with its UK in a Changing Europe¹ (UKICE) initiative. The issue gathers a group of BPG projects that address spatial aspects of the UK's EU exit and adds in some other Brexit-related research. Taken together the collection provides, I hope, some enduring points of reference that help to make sense of Brexit in territorial and regional terms.

Before turning to the individual articles, I will touch briefly on the context from which the collection emerged, attending to two issues. The broad context of the years after the 2016 Brexit referendum was of particularly intense pressures on societal research, during which distinctive opportunities for social science engagement and impact also emerged. First, I first consider the role of UKICE as a developing platform for engagement and impact across a range of social science disciplines. Here, I use the pathbreaking research of Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler on social science impact (Bastow et al. 2014a, 2014b) as an essential analytical foil. Second, I reflect on some challenges and benefits of cross-

disciplinary working – of drawing together a publication of regionally and territorially focused social science across multiple disciplines. Here, I note how disciplines differ in their treatment of space – attending primarily to territoriality and regionalism, but also to place and locality.

Brexit presents new (internal and external) choices to UK decision-makers. But choice is not a synonym for control: the most important choices are tough (Wincott 2017) and consequential. They constrain or shape subsequent options. As it withdrew from the EU, the UK government often ducked hard choices. Even after the UK left the EU, many remained unresolved: they continued to generate conflict under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (Menon and Portes, 2021). UK government's approach to internal governance seems similarly abrasive. Despite devolution, the UK state remains highly centralized. At its centre, the state is imagined as a single (Anglo-British) space (Wincott *et al* this volume, Davies and Wincott 2021, Murray and Wincott 2020, Wincott *et al.* forthcoming). Yet central control is limited by regional and local capacity; insisting on its governing autonomy will limit the centre's reach and grip. The central state could end up with more control over fewer matters. In short, internally as well as externally, anyone looking to 'take back control' for Westminster and Whitehall confronts a paradox of structure (Wincott 2020a): attempting to control 'levelling up' from the centre limits its reach; sharing power to 'level up' inevitably constrains central government. After discussing the articles that make up this special issue, informed by their contributions, the introduction will reconsider the UK government's so-called 'levelling up agenda'.

2. The social sciences and ‘impact’

Bastow et al. argue, rightly, that effective social science ‘impact’ depends on ‘timely’ societal research produced speedily, capturing the salient features of a situation ... that may shift quickly’ (2014a: xiii). ‘All applied and impactful academic knowledge must also be ‘translated’ from single-discipline silos: ‘bridged and integrated with the insights of other disciplines ... assimilated into a joined-up picture so as to adequately encompass real world situations’; it must be ‘communicated or transferred to non-academic people and organizations, and their lessons mediated, deliberated and drawn out in usable ways’ (Bastow et al 2014a xiii). They are sharply critical of stories about social science research fashioned around the image of a ‘lone genius’ (2014a) or ‘mini-leader’ (2014b). Relatedly, they excoriate conceptualisation of impact through self-contained ‘case studies’ for promoting ‘unrealistic Platonic guardian images of the scope for influence’ (2014b: 1).

The ESRC’s UKICE is a fundamentally interdisciplinary initiative, developed to promote the translation of social science research and expertise into effective engagement with and impact on public debate and public policymaking related to the internal and external dynamics and implications of Brexit. Arguably centred on political science, the initiative also draws heavily on economic and legal analyses as well as disciplines from geography and sociology to anthropology and psychology. UKICE has established a strong identity and extensive media presence as well as an enviable reputation with politicians and policymakers. UKICE has a hub office – based at Kings College London – and an interdisciplinary core team as well as, at various times, sets of Senior Fellows

drawn from universities across the UK and, for a period shortly after the 2016 referendum, the 25 impact-focused BPG projects. It has come to provide a platform for impact available social scientists in the UK and beyond, which provides precisely the kind of silo-breaking, bridging and translation platform for which Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler call (2014a).

Equally, UKICE's record might suggest that the Bastow *et al* take on impact may downplay the role of agency and 'leadership'. There is little doubt that UKICE's Director Professor Anand Menon has played a critical role – both as a credible media performer and in giving policy advice – as has the wider core team, including UKICE's current Deputy Directors Law Professor Catherine Barnard and political sociologist Paula Surridge plus its Senior Research Fellow Jill Rutter, a former Civil Servant.

In the world of think tanks, UKICE's unique strength is its connection a rich and varied body of academic research and expertise – in the first instance through its Senior Fellows and, previously, through the BPG teams. Operating across these networks has provided a platform on which the UKICE's core team can perform as well as offering specific expertise in a variety of areas. Equally, UKICE's credibility can provide other academics with a bridge towards impact. Its standard operating practices aim to help academics 'translate' their research for other audiences. Of course, each translation aims to make some core message easier to comprehend for its intended audience – and any exercise in translation runs a risk of changing something critical about that core message. If, for example, the standard conception of a policy issue in Whitehall is part of the

problem, translating academic research findings about it into a language and format that makes sense in Whitehall may not help in getting to the nub of the matter at issue.

Another dimension is also relevant here. The Senior Fellowships and BPGs were self-consciously designed as impact-oriented projects. In the end, though, their strength – and that of UKICE more generally – is grounded in the depth and richness of the underlying social science research base on which they draw. That research tends to operate in an environment structured by academic disciplines. ESRC has also sought to engender and support work across disciplines in a more fundamental and longer-term mode, including through its Governance after Brexit programme. Drawing too sharp a distinction between ‘basic’ and ‘impact-oriented’ social science research is unhelpful – the former can be profoundly impactful, while a focus on impact can generate basic insights and findings.

Though these initiatives are closely coordinated, and overlap significantly in their disciplinary range, it is worth noting that UKICE’s senior fellows and BPGs have drawn on somewhat different bundles of social science disciplines to those represented in the Governance after Brexit programme. The former focused on political science, economics and law, the latter also drawing in more anthropology, sociology, socio-legal studies and geography. Taken together, UKICE and Governance after Brexit cover a significantly broad range across the UK social sciences (in addition to this special issue, see, for example, the research reported in a *Journal of Common Market Studies* symposium on ‘Impacts of Brexit

on Civil Society, Parliament and Access to Justice: Barnard and Fraser-Butlin 2020, Cygan *et al* 2020, Minto 2020, Wincott 2020a).

The range of disciplines and approaches raises another important question about social science impact. Bastow *et al.* tend to emphasise social sciences that seek “‘laws’ of social development’ using ‘quantitative data and analysis, ‘digital scholarship’ methods, formal theoretical statement, or social theory as their intellectual spine’, rather than ‘informal modes of theorizing, very detailed qualitative work, or ... narrative and persuasive writing’ (2014a: 4).

Emphatically, they do not adopt a naïvely empiricist approach – they also argue that all ‘social science generalizations are inherently probabilistic, none are determinative, and all depend on large and baggy *ceteris paribus* clauses.’ They ‘must handle an inescapable tension between ... reductionist research tactic[s] ... and the recognition that all social processes operate in complex, multi-causal environments’ (2014a: xiii).

Bastow *et al.* are too hasty, I suggest, in downplaying the potential impact of qualitative social research into particular or specific matters. It may be helpful think around their idea of ‘inescapable tensions’ in terms of generalization and particularism as well as between reductionism and complexity (and rather than, say, quantitative and qualitative research). First, ‘particular’ research often has an ‘impact’ – notably for the specific context in which it operates (including through co-production). Focusing on impact at the level of UK central government (Bastow *et al.* 2014b) is of unquestionable value, but digging in to the particular challenges in specific local authorities may be at least as revealing

about the English governance – and have significant impacts locally.² Second, some ‘general’ quantitative research – such as the Consumer Data Research Centre’s ESRC- funded pilot on Local Data Spaces³ that integrated diverse data sources at a local authority spatial scale – serves to generate general resources that are best applied in particular places by actors with specific local knowledge and understanding.

Third, generalising research is inevitably ‘framed’ – placed in a (particular) conceptual framework or set of understandings. These frames are easily and often treated as ‘natural’ or taken for granted, despite being constructed and contestable. We shall see, for example, how analysis framed as ‘British Politics’ makes it harder to make sense of Brexit. Many economic debates are framed by conceptions of performance framed in terms of growth in GDP. As the economist Diane Coyle (2014) has shown, GDP is an invented and changing economic measure. Ethnographic and other ‘very detailed qualitative work’ can dig deeply into a particular setting or context in ways that can unveil taken-for-granted social, political and economic framings. Coyle, as a consequence, has called for the creation of a UK Chief Government Anthropologist to sit alongside the Chief Government Economist (2021).

It is not, of course, only anthropologists who address the particular or question conventional framings. Historically oriented research can unveil fallacies of anachronism – including the ways in which current preoccupations are read back into the past, often to justify some current option has historical legitimated or even inevitable. Several articles in this collection serve as a record of an

extraordinary period in UK politics and society, providing enduring points of reference for a period about which ‘historic alternatives’ risk being ‘suppressed’ in standard narratives (Moore Jr. 1978, Wincott 2017). Equally, quantitative research can be used to interrogate ‘common sense’ frames. Survey experiments and deliberative polling investigate conventional wisdoms and tough choices. Finally, researchers who focus on particular contexts or phenomena cannot, I would argue, wholly escape the logic of generalisation, since few repudiate (and fewer manage wholly to avoid) the use of conceptual language – and (at least implicitly) that language has generalising implications.

Broad issues about how apparently cognate disciplines address, or frame, similar and overlapping concerns are particularly relevant to our focus on Brexit’s spatial – that is territorial and regional – dimensions. So too is the tension between generalisation and engagement with particular circumstances, contexts and actors. It is to these issues of space and method that we now turn.

3. Disciplines and space: territory and place; locality and region

If Brexit has revealed a need for conversations across disciplines, UKICE and Governance after Brexit have provided an opportunity within which they can develop. Equally, cross-disciplinary conversations are complicated and can be difficult to convene. Disciplines and approaches use their own terms, concepts and frameworks even where the objects of analysis overlap. Reading across the contributions here reveals different ways of treating of spatial issues, variously associated with regional economics, devolution and multi-level politics to matters of jurisdiction and policy. Broadly speaking, economic analysts tend to

conceptualize space in regional terms, whereas political analysts of UK devolution address space as territory. Consequently, agricultural and regional economists tend to treat the UK or Britain as the 'nation', with regions a sub-*national* or regions and places (in effect treating the UK or Britain as the 'nation') while devolution specialists in law and political science often address sub-*state* units (acknowledging that they can have a national character (except for Northern Ireland, where the distinct territorial legal jurisdiction is more significant)).

This legal-political language is also particular to UK territorial politics, or at least does not generalize to all multi-level systems – the US or Germany call their 'domestic' units 'states'. For comparative studies – especially of EU 'regional' networks – analysts of devolved UK policies sometimes use the term 'region' for UK sub-state nations (see Minto and Parken, this volume). Since some, at least, of the terms used reflect real differences in subject matter or concepts, imposing a common conceptual language would be counterproductive. Equally, though, the differences are significant, reflecting on them tells us things about social science and the UK – and readers need to be aware of the variety and range of terms used here.

More generally, the standard conceptual language associated with the 'nation-state' obscures as much as it reveals. The assumption that the nation-state is the primary unit for analysis is deeply rooted in the social sciences. It tends to naturalize the view that nations correspond to states and *vice-versa* (Jeffery and Wincott 2010). The UK is particularly hard to grasp in standard 'nation-state'

terms. Mainstream political analysis also struggles to grasp its territorial aspects. It remains dominated by a 'British Politics' framing, which tends to separate off Northern Ireland's politics, but subsumes Scotland, Wales and also England. The British Politics can seem 'baked in' to the data infrastructure of the discipline.

Mostly the UK (or Britain) appears as both the nation and the state; sometimes, instead the language of 'four nations' is adopted. This approach may capture something about national identities, which seem to operate at two levels – apparently state-wide British identity, sub-state English, Scottish and Welsh identities. Yet English and British identities often co-mingle, while there tends to be something of a tension between British and Scottish or Welsh identities (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021). Moreover, Northern Ireland is hard to describe as a nation. Some people there identify as British, while others identify as Irish, typically with another state and nation. Northern Ireland is sometimes called a Province, and some inhabitants identify with Ulster. It includes six of the nine historic counties of Ulster. Evidence has emerged of another identity, attached to neither traditional community in Northern Ireland. Strikingly, we lack a word that derives from the name of the state – the United Kingdom – for its inhabitants.

Four nations language also obscures as much as it reveals about the UK's complex and asymmetric territorial institutional structures. Rather than one UK-wide system, in political-legal terms UK devolution is uneven and complex: a patchwork of distinct historic legacies and bi-lateral deals with the Anglo-British centre. England, governed largely through UK-wide Anglo-British institutions, is

particularly difficult to grasp analytically (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021).

Little exists to define England – by far the largest part of the UK – as a positive political or legal space, with few distinct governance practices (think of English Votes for English Laws). Instead, it is as a political and policy space defined largely by default, at once dominant and, in a sense, neglected. Westminster and Whitehall often seem to forget the many areas in which their remit runs only to England's borders.

The distinctive structure of territorial legal jurisdictions is particularly poorly understood. Scotland and Northern Ireland have always been distinct and separate legal jurisdictions within the UK, whereas Wales was incorporated into the English legal system in the 1500s (becoming more standardised within the single 'English' – or England and Wales – jurisdiction during the 1800s).

Following the Government of Wales Act 2006, it has been possible in Wales to make primary legislation, meaning that the UK has had four legislatures with primary law-making powers, albeit it two (the UK parliament and the (now) Welsh Parliament or Senedd) within one legal jurisdiction. These institutions provided a foundation for distinctly different devolved positions on Brexit, which were largely ignored by the UK government.

Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are defined in cultural, national or institutional-political terms – rather than as coherent functional economic units. Yet their scale makes them amenable to analysis as economic regions – potentially matched by English 'regions' of roughly similar size. Economic analysis of sub-national regions defined as territorially organized jurisdictions or

regional political units can help to overcome the limits of and gaps in economic analysis framed the nation-state level. Equally economists can develop bottom-up analyses, for example analysing agriculture through spatial-geographic variations in the distribution of types of farms and farmers or defining regions around geographic clusters and travel to work areas.

As in the other nations and jurisdictions, devolution within England has been *ad hoc* and bilateral. It extends only to some places, which receive different palates of powers. Regional-type political or policy units constructed within England are on a 'city-region' metro-mayor basis. Viewed in the round, the character of these arrangements is more fragmented than patchwork. Some English regions displayed coordinated engagement on Brexit. The West Midlands provides one example, reflecting the regional concentration of advanced manufacturing especially the car industry (Belling *et al.*). But they still gained less profile in Brexit debates than the better entrenched national devolved authorities for Scotland and Wales, or some actors from Northern Ireland. Some English city-region leaders gained a relatively greater political prominence during the Covid-19 pandemic than they managed through Brexit, which might suggest their time is coming.

4. The Articles.

The SI's first section is composed of analyses of the UK's national/jurisdictional territories, variously analysing public attitudes data in Northern Ireland and then across the nations of Great Britain, considering the constitutional politics of Brexit across the four nations/jurisdictions, and addressing intergovernmental

relations of the UK with Scotland and Wales. The second section offers a 'regionally' framed analysis of the implications of gender equality policy in Wales as well as a study of health policy across all four UK polities, followed by an analysis of the Brexit and regional economic governance and an analysis of the intersection of territorial and sectoral dynamics in agriculture.

The first substantive article – 'Analysing vote-choice in a multinational state' (Henderson *et al.*) – uses the British Election Study's (BES) generous overall sample size to create sub-samples for England, Scotland and Wales. This use of the BES – known as the 'gold standard' for electoral attitudes data – remains rare. Henderson *et al* develop parallel analyses of vote choice in the Brexit referendum in the three British nations. They operationalize a measure of relative territorial identity (RTI) to capture the complex multi-levelled reality of national identities across Britain. Existing accounts (Clarke *et al* 2017) argued that Scottish identifiers tended to vote remain (although their operationalization of national identities – using British identity as a reference category – may mean this result largely reflects overall pro-remain result in Scotland). Many commentators have attributed Brexit to English nationalism, but that proposition rigorously tested empirically (but see Henderson *et al* 2017, Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021). Here, Henderson *et al* show analytically that both these propositions are true, confirming and deepening results for England found in other data and testing it for Scotland in multivariate analysis with a non-binary national identity variable.

Wales is often lumped together with England, with a shared pro-Leave aggregate outcome perhaps confirming some prior expectations about wider political similarities. However, Henderson *et al* show national identities in Wales and Scotland operate in similar ways – and display the opposite pattern to England. Those emphasizing Welsh identity were more likely to vote Remain, while British identifiers tended to opt for Leave. At least with respect to Brexit, identify as British means sharply different things depending on where you live. Those who give priority to English identity in England seem to share political attitudes to Brexit with British identifiers in Scotland and Wales.

Compared to Great Britain, explaining the 2016 referendum outcome in Northern Ireland is straightforward. People who identify as Irish tended to vote remain, as did those who embrace neither of the traditional community identities. A majority of Unionists who voted supported leaving the EU. The referendum's consequences for Northern Ireland are more complex. How far were historic ethno-nationalist communities' identities (re)activated by the referendum and the subsequent politics of Brexit? What of the Democratic Unionist Party's position of influence at Westminster after the UK 2017 election? Ultimately, how might the form of UK exit impact on the future of Northern Ireland, including the appetite for Irish unity? Noting that UKexit is a more precise term than Brexit John Garry and colleagues address these questions in 'The Future of Northern Ireland'.

Garry *et al.* analyse how different forms of UKexit impact on Northern Ireland, its borders and rights protections as well, ultimately, as attitudes towards Irish

unity. The team conducted public attitudes surveys and deliberative citizens' assembly work in February/March 2018. They identify a critical group - 'conditional Catholics' who would support Irish unity, specifically under 'hard exit' conditions. In the event, exit has been 'hard', but with particular arrangements for Northern Ireland. Those arrangements have remained contested and unsettled even after the UK's formal exit from the EU. The UK government was trapped in and continued to struggle against the 'Brexit trilemma' (see Keleman 2018): moving outside the Single Market and Customs Union for goods forces a choice between having a trade border on the island of Ireland in the Irish Sea). Keeping border anxieties alive as a political issue in Northern Ireland is only likely to heighten tensions. The space for constructive constitutional ambiguities is reduced, and the forms of civil and political action that can take place within them weakened. Garry *et al* provide an enduring point of reference attitudes to a border poll and Irish unity as the politics of Johnson's 'hard exit', larded with border ambiguities, plays out. Uniquely in the UK, Irish unity provides Northern Ireland with a path back to EU membership.

The third article – Wincott *et al*'s 'Crisis, What Crisis?' – addresses the UK's constitutional arrangements across all four major territorial units: the UK state, including in its role as the government of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It focuses on constitutional dimensions of the Brexit positions developed by politicians in power in each place, showing that distinctly different constitutional claims were made in every territory. The differences are grounded in the particular institutional settings and specific constitutional traditions at Westminster and in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The UK's

‘constitution’ has worked through its deep-seated difference by fudging them, leaving them ‘constructively’ ambiguous. The UK’s EU membership both helped to hide the ambiguities and provided an ‘external’ framework, or ‘scaffold’, which helped to hold the UK together. That Ireland was an EU member also helped (Lagana 2021).

The article also contributes to crisis theory, building on Hay (2009), developing a typology of crisis-related concepts to apply to constitutional politics. Crisis itself is defined as a decisive, contradiction-resolving intervention, that transforms the context for subsequent developments. Applying this framework shows that the referendum and Brexit processes under Theresa May’s period disambiguated constitutional discourse, bringing differences between the UK’s parts to the sensitive surface of public debate and statecraft. Political febrility marked May’s Premiership – a sense of chaos and public affairs running out of control. Equally, though, no strategy developed to resolve the constitution’s tensions and ambiguities. The article identifies an Anglo-British imaginary that dominates UK-level constitutional discourse. It remains stubbornly impermeable to perspectives from elsewhere in the UK.

Nicola McEwen turns our attention to institutional politics. ‘Negotiating Brexit’ analyses power dynamics in UK intergovernmental relations (IGR) under Theresa May from the referendum to the Withdrawal Agreement which set out the ‘divorce terms’ on which the UK then left the EU. First, she distinguishes three forms of power that the devolved governments might exercise in their relationships with the UK level: constitutional, procedural and ‘soft’ power.

Second, she differentiates their operation in external and internal aspects of Brexit.

Negotiating the terms of withdrawal – the external aspect – was conducted by the UK government and the EU. Michel Barnier negotiated for the whole EU under a mandate set by the Member States. The UK government could have involved devolved governments in constructing the UK's negotiating position or included them in the negotiating team somehow, though it was under no obligation to do so. The newly created Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) for European Negotiations (JMC(EN)) did not, McEwen shows, focus on negotiations with the EU. Despite their clearly articulated (Wincott *et al*) positions, May's administration chose not to involve the devolved governments in, nor engage with them over, the UK's negotiating position.

Brexit was bound to impact on the UK's internal devolution arrangements – policies 'returning' to the UK had to 'land' somewhere. The original draft of May's European Union (Withdrawal) implied a 'raid' on devolved competences, McEwen argues, and might have threatened devolution's 'reserved powers' model. Devolved actors deployed several strategies to resist these changes, including working with sympathetic members of the House of Lords. The devolved governments were, McEwen shows, able to use the JMC(EN) to negotiate changes to these internal proposals within the UK. As enacted, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act finally (2018) somewhat less threatening to devolution than the initial Bill. Even so, ultimately the Scottish Parliament did not consent to the legislation, which Westminster nonetheless passed into law.

In itself, that choice amounted to a departure from the practice of devolution in normal times.

May's period in office was one of constitutional failure rather than crisis (Wincott *et al*), but Johnson's administration has been much more assertive. Its UK's Internal Market Act (Dogan et al 2020) re-opened devolved issues on which May had moved. It was enacted despite strongly phrased objections from Scotland and Wales and without consent from the devolved legislatures. Under Johnson, patterns of interaction between UK and devolved governments over both Brexit Covid-19 policy have raised the stakes regarding the future of the UK territorial state. 'Hard exit' may increase support for Irish unity in Northern Ireland. Independence was a key issue in the May 2021 devolved elections in Scotland. It is also increasingly discussed in Wales. Both incumbents – the SNP and Welsh Labour – maintained a strong grip on devolved power. Very different parties hold power in each part of the UK. If fate seems to beckon the UK territorial state towards a decisive moment, an extended period of mutual hostility, of abrasive deadlock, between UK and devolved governments is as likely a medium term outcome.

The SI'S second substantive section addresses Brexit's *Policy and Economic* impacts. Minto and Parken analyse Brexit and UK gender equality policy, focusing on Wales (see also Minto 2020 for a comparative analysis of these issues across Britain). They delineate a distinctive Welsh gender equality policy model, developed a 'velvet triangle' advocacy network of politicians, academics and civil society activists. Even prior to devolution, this network operated partly in an EU

context. It helped to shape the terms of the initial Welsh devolution dispensation, cementing in a commitment to *equality for all*.

This rich Feminist Institutional analysis of the Welsh Model's historical development traces its emergence before devolution, impact on the 'mainstreaming' of equality within devolution's founding legislation and influence on the European Structural Funds' operation in Wales. Despite arguing that the EU's equality provisions are not particularly deep, Minto and Parken show that actors in Wales (and elsewhere in the UK) used them as a resource and tool-kit to strengthen gender equality discourses and policies domestically.

What, then, are Brexit's implications for Welsh gender equality policy? The distinctive gender equality model Minto and Parken delineate is reasonably well entrenched. Having drawn on from ideas, policy frames and tools originating in EU fora, it may now be sufficiently well-institutionalized to survive and develop within Wales' devolved political system. On the other hand, Brexit contains potential threats. The scale of funding in Wales from European Structural Funds has been much larger in than for anywhere else in the UK. The UK government's proposed 'Shared Prosperity Fund' has been widely touted but slow to emerge. Although justifiable in a pan-European context, UK domestic politics make disbursing a similar relative level of funding for West Wales and the Valleys seem less likely. Aside from its scale, the proposed funding instrument is focused on prosperity rather than cohesion or equality suggesting that the UK government's priorities differ from those of the EU – in ways that may not bode well for gender equality-oriented work that has benefited from EU funding in the

past. Finally, the UK Internal Market Act (2020) provides London with new financial policy instruments, suggesting that it may seek to hold the whip hand for this funding. If this pattern holds, it does not bode well for Wales' distinctive gender policy model however hospitable the devolved institutions may be.

McHale *et al.* analyse Brexit, health policy and the UK's multi-level governance system. They cast new light on the NHS and healthcare provision across the UK. After setting Brexit in a multi-level governance context, they address six key challenges: the relationship between formal and *de facto* powers for health; public health; socio-economic disadvantage; questions about staffing; issues of medicine and equipment supply; and finally, some matters that are specific to the position of Northern Ireland. McHale *et al* rapidly dispose of any notion that the NHS is a singular UK-wide institution and devolved health policy competences and responsibilities have broad ramifications. Equally, devolved NHS, health policy and public health are complicated by trans-UK interdependencies and linkages. They thread across policy domains and crisscross reserved and devolved competences. Despite distinct devolved procurement systems, a critical supply shortage would, the analysis shows, 'affect the Health Service UK-wide', given the state-wide market. For Northern Ireland these interdependences extend across the island of Ireland, including all provision of children's cardiac services in Dublin since 2015. Especially in the island's northwest, critical infrastructure (including Altnagelvin Hospital) routinely serves people on both sides of the border.

Devolved health policy ranges across policy fields and intersects with social and economic structures. Devolved regulation, of say alcohol and tobacco, has aimed at minimizing their impact on public health. Health outcomes hinge on deeper structured patterns in social and economic life: unemployment and other social disadvantages have clear health impacts. Health policymakers connected Brexit's potential economic impact to health outcomes. In Wales, health experts showed striking awareness of how 'just-in-time' automotive supply-chains connect the economy of south Wales to the English Midlands.

The SI's final two articles focus on Brexit's economic implications. Both analyze the whole UK, focusing on spatial and regional variations and inequalities and considering differential sectoral impacts. Billing *et al* address imbalances across sectors and regions of the UK economy. They explore expert and policy-maker perspectives on Brexit's anticipated impacts. Participatory stakeholder events were held in Leeds, Birmingham, London and Edinburgh, with each also focused on a particular sector or issue-set. London focused on services, particularly in finance, Birmingham on logistics and advanced manufacturing. Leeds and Edinburgh addressed governance questions – respectively city-region devolution and challenges facing towns and cities in the north of England; devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Structured around the events, the article weaves together Brexit's regional, governance and sectoral impacts. It highlights the different degrees of integration among local/regional, devolved and UK-level policymakers. Providing highly skilled employment, the West Midlands' advanced, high-tech

manufacturing economy is tightly integrated in Europe-wide supply chains. Industry leaders have close connections to regional policymakers. The Midlands differs from parts northern England, considered at Leeds, which are marked by a weak skills-base and poorly developed local innovation strategies. Belling *et al.* find that most UK-based exporting firms were unprepared for Brexit. They question firm's ability rapidly to reconfigure supply chains globally as EU options fall away. The London event focused on high-value service industries, particularly financial services. It also considered the degree of reliance of EU migrants in the London economy. Focused less on their diverse sectoral economic structures, the focus at Edinburgh was on governance issues and heterogeneous spatial impacts of economics shocks.

Some themes have a territorial dimension, without being primarily clustered regionally. Agriculture bulks larger in the devolved economies, where farm incomes have been more dependent on EU subsidies than in England. These differences reflect the relative weight of various types of farm in the four territories, notably the smaller proportion of economically marginal upland hill farms in England. Equally, universities play a significant economic role across the UK. The economic, social and political make-up of university towns and cities differs from those without an institution of higher education.

Across the full set of places and sectors Belling *et al* found experts foresaw few, if any, direct economic benefits from Brexit. Equally, they discovered considerable evidence of pragmatic adjustment to Brexit among local and regional policymakers, albeit it tempered by other concerns. In particular, a deep and

widely spread unease about centralized governance was evident, particularly across places facing a variety of economic and social problems. The loss of EU structural funds was also a recurring theme. The loss of EU structural funds was also a recurring theme. Repeatedly, institutional issues and questions of territorial governance – local regional and devolved – were identified as enduring problems, originating long before the Brexit referendum. Belling *et al.* (p. 4) argue that ‘local and regional development policy in the UK during the last decade has been very ad hoc and fragmented ... [an] increasingly characterized by a rather ad hoc patchwork of different development geographies [which] ... either overlap or fail to dovetail neatly with one another’. The UK’s devolved nations/jurisdictions are, the analysis suggests, generally better able to develop specific territorial responses to Brexit, particularly in Scotland. Far from helping to ‘level up’, Belling *et al.* argue that Brexit’s spatial impacts are likely to exacerbate long-standing challenges of regional imbalances and inequalities.

Ojo *et al.* analyse Brexit’s impact on agriculture at the individual farm level, focusing on farm incomes. The analysis distinguishes between different farm types, using Farm Business Survey data to model farm businesses under several UK agriculture trade policy scenarios (a UK-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) Unilateral trade liberalization (UTL) and most favoured nation-common external tariff (MFN/CET)). (The UK has now chosen not to pursue the modelled form of UK-EU FTA.) Each scenario is simulated with and without direct payments along the lines of the CAP Pillar Basic Payment Scheme. Ojo *et al.* categorize the viability, sustainability or vulnerability of farms (the Via-Sus-Vul model) Viable farm can pay family labour minimum wage and provide a 5% return on non-land

capital assets. Non-viable farms can be sustainable if the farmer (or spouse) has a non-farm income, otherwise they are vulnerable. Finally, the analysis builds up from farm level data to consider the patterns in each of the UK's four major nations/jurisdictions as well as the UK as a whole.

Disentangling these scenarios' impacts means distinguishing different farm types and the farm-type mix in each UK nation/jurisdiction. Both whether the farm is supported by a non-farm income and the form and levels of public support and subsidy for farming also prove critical. The analysis suggests dramatically better prospects for dairy than livestock farms, with cereals producers somewhere in the middle. Although Brexit hits beef and sheep farms especially hard, due to non-farm incomes, nearly 60% are sustainable across the UK. Although variation by farm-type are most striking, different patterns of farm business specialization and structure make prospects vary across the four nations/jurisdictions, with England in the best relative position. Scotland has a 'predominance of extensive beef and sheep production' (Ojo *et al* p. 13), which non-farm incomes may make sustainable. Where non-farm incomes are difficult to generate, particular political challenges may emerge. Farms bulk large in the economy of Northern Ireland, but relatively few farming families there generate non-farm incomes. In Wales, where 'almost 4100 farm households are classified as economically vulnerable' (Ojo *et al* p. 13) large-scale farm failures could have devastating consequences for across swathes of rural Wales. The wider social and political ramifications could prove particularly significant in places where Welsh is the primary language of daily life.

Public support for farm incomes is a critical piece of this jigsaw. In principle, each of the UK's four central governments can decide on its form and extent, tailoring support to particular needs. For example, the UK government is placing a premium on supporting new forms of land management in England, focusing on environmental aims as a key element of agricultural policy. Equally, devolved governments may face a particular bind in over how to support farm businesses that face basic problems of long-term viability, while wielding significant political influence or occupying an important social position. Finally, since the summer of 2020, the UK government has adopted an increasingly assertive and centralist formulation of 'Unionism', for example in its UK Internal Market Act (2020). How might it if devolved governments develop agricultural policies that appear to advantage farmers in Dumfries & Galloway or North Wales over those in Cumbria?

5. Concluding observations

Since the BPG projects were completed, increasing complexity and contestation has marked UK regional economics and territorial politics. Theresa May (2016) stated her commitment to the 'precious union', but none of her seven 'burning injustices' explicitly addressed territoriality. Place-based concerns and territorial issues, which grew in prominence during her premiership, have become much more central to public debate since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister.

From the start of his Premiership, Johnson (2019) spoke of 'levelling up' – a clever political slogan. Initially the primary focus was on per-pupil spending levels in primary and secondary schools, also extended to 'safer streets ... and

fantastic new road and rail infrastructure and full fibre broadband'. So Johnson's use of levelling up language to link diverse issues was evident from the beginning. Despite the primary focus on the devolved issue of school education, Johnson (2019) linked levelling up to his leadership of the 'whole United Kingdom and that means uniting our country, answering at last the plea of the forgotten people, and the left behind towns'.

Conservative successes across the north of England and into north Wales at the 2019 election – turning the erstwhile 'red wall' blue – only made 'levelling up' more prominent. Johnson chose to pursue a form of Brexit that decisively put the priority on sovereignty and control over maintaining relationships with the EU, including at the expense of a more substantial regulatory border in the Irish Sea, while Northern Ireland and Great Britain each have a different relationship with the EU. The UK government's approach to post-Brexit governance embraces a strikingly assertive centralism. The Internal Market Act, passed at the end of 2020, is emblematic of this approach (Wincott *et al.* forthcoming). Highly controversial, the Act would normally require explicit consent of the devolved legislatures. The Scottish and Welsh Parliaments refused to give consent, while no formal consent motion was laid in Belfast before the Act became law.

Local and regional disparities are prominent among the myriad inequalities brutally revealed by Covid-19. Covid has also placed additional strain on arrangements of territorial governance across the UK, especially for local authorities weakened by a decade of austerity. It has, on the other hand, enhanced the prominence of devolved and regional leaders. Already well known,

Nicola Sturgeon has gained profile during the pandemic, while Covid has transformed the attention given to First Minister Mark Drakeford, both within Wales and across the UK. Among English metro-mayors Andy Burnham has a particularly enhanced profile in UK-wide debates.

Covid has revealed a Westminster/Whitehall state that struggles to 'read' the UK (Wincott 2020b). If imagined as a singular Anglo-British space, the UK is difficult to understand and even harder to govern. Dating back at least to Margaret Thatcher's abolition of the Greater London Council, decades of centralization have eviscerated local capacities to make and deliver public policies. The Anglo-British imaginary (Wincott *et al*, Wincott *et al*. forthcoming) distorted the development of devolution under Tony Blair. For example, no compelling normative rationale was ever given for the territorial distribution of public spending either within England or across the UK (Wincott 2006). Various principles are available – needs-based, efficiency-based or developmental – but there has been remarkably little discussion of these matters.

Boris Johnson's 'levelling up' is best seen as the latest episode of a long-running show. Widely adopted, including by politicians from rival parties, it signals a concern with a set of issues that are generally agreed to be important problems. Yet it is sufficiently imprecise to avoid tying the government to any particular policy or objective. Critically, it suggests that the problems of places at the lower 'level' can be addressed without setting back other 'higher level' places. It glosses over the question of whether resources will be redistributed from 'higher' to 'lower' level places – and whether the former would have to 'hold still', while the

latter 'catch up', or might continue to move 'up' while 'lower' places start to move 'up' at a fast enough rate to 'level up'. Compared to May's 'injustices' Johnson's preferred language here is bland, although even her harder-edged discourse avoided direct use of the language of inequality and redistribution.

Levelling up has generated some valuable changes – such as the Treasury's Green Book for evaluating major infrastructure investments (see CBI 2020). However, unless the UK government proves capable of making hard choices – precisely the selections between options elided by the term 'levelling up' – this 'agenda' has little chance of achieving the objective it appears to set. Research reported here, conducted before Johnson became Prime Minister, reveals that these place-based and territorial problems are long-standing and deeply engrained (Belling *et al*). They are reflected in and exacerbated by a fragmented, ad hoc and often chaotic set of arrangements for territorial governance, both within England and across the UK as a whole. Even before a decade of austerity, English local government had experienced a decades long squeeze on resources, autonomy and policy competence. Alongside these issues, the UK state faces sharp questions about its future. In early 2021 Irish unification and Scottish independence are both live political issues. In Wales, new debates are emerging about the relationship with England, and about independence.

For all the talk of 'levelling up', the instinct at the centre of UK state remains centralist – perhaps newly assertive and abrasive form. Rebuilding general English local government capacity is not, it seems, central to 'levelling up'.. Instead, it seems set to take the form of competitive bidding from localities for

centrally controlled funds, against centrally defined criteria. So far from rebalancing, distributing funding in this way could prove counterproductive, especially if partisan politics bulk large within the process. Some senior government ministers seem to invite an old-fashioned pork barrel politic: in a January 2021 lecture to the Study of Parliament Group Jacob Rees-Mogg (2021) proclaimed that ‘Boosting businesses through build-back-better bills will bring blessing from the burghers in their boroughs, blissfully buttressing backbenchers to boot.’

Assertive, and at times abrasive, centralism seems to characterize the Johnson administration’s approach to devolved governments as well as English localities. The government is wrapping itself in the symbols of the Union. When speaking from home during the Covid pandemic, by early 2021 Johnson’s ministers almost invariably decorated their background with Union flag. In substantive policy terms too, things seem to be changing. The UK government has always been directly responsible for considerable public spending in each devolved territory – and devolved expenditure involves substantial territorial redistribution. Previously, UK governments have been surprising reticent about these spending patterns. The Johnson administration is now, it seems, going well beyond claiming credit for UK government spending. The UK government’s Internal Market Act (2020) took new powers for public spending in devolved territories on devolved functions, which do require cooperation or agreement from the devolved governments. For example, Johnson has repeated spoken of overturning a Welsh Government decision not to pursue a relief road around the city of Newport in south Wales for the M4 motorway, by funding it directly from

London. Whatever the merits of the particular policy decision, Johnson's approach to the issue has been abrasive as well as assertive.

Over the period after the end of January 2021, the Johnson government seemed to settle into a fractious relationship with the EU. Some tough choices had been deferred, attempts were made to reopen other, apparently settled, choices. The Trade and Cooperation Agreement has generated little mutual goodwill (Menon and Portes 2021). The administration's approach to its internal relations seems similarly abrasive. Domestically, the UK state faces the possibility of Scottish independence or Irish unification (Wincott 2020b). Less noticed, but arguably more significant, the UK may face an extended period of political deadlock and mutual hostility between its governments. Of course, its domestic and external interlocutors also have incentives to dramatize disagreement and friction. The UK government seems to be the common element across these fractious relationships.

Devolution was not accompanied by a wide-ranging debate on Union's normative foundations (Wincott 2006). What mix of devolved autonomy and mutual support should it try to achieve? What obligations do people owe one another as citizens of the UK as a whole? What rights should they be able to claim? The relationships between central authorities and local governments in each part of the UK – England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – have begged similar questions for even longer. These are deep issues about the UK state. Since they long predate levelling up, it is not especially surprising that this

‘agenda’ does not address them. Equally, depending on how it is pursued, the ‘levelling up agenda may make these fundamental questions harder to answer.

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