Interventions on Europe's political futures

CrossMark

Fiona McConnell [d], [*], Merje Kuus [c], Alex Jeffrey [b], Heaven Crawley [a],
Nick Vaughan-Williams [f], Adrian Smith [e]

[a] Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR), Coventry University, IV5, Innovation Village, Cheetah Road, Coventry, CV1 2TL, UK
[b] Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Downing Place, Cambridge, CB2 3EN, UK
[c] Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, Vancouver Campus, 1984 West Mall, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z2, Canada
[d] School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford, OX1 3QY, UK
[e] School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London, London, E1 4NS, UK
[f] Department of Politics and International Studies, Social Sciences Building, The University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK

ABSTRACT

Europe is facing challenging times. The so-called 'migration crisis' has seen the hardening and militarisation of Europe's borders. Nationalist politicians are framing European states as being under siege from Islamist terrorists and economic migrants, which has led to a rise in xenophobia and casual racism on the streets of European cities. Meanwhile the Euro-zone has seen a series of employment crises and economic bailouts. Alongside such political and economic turmoil, the European Union is facing unprecedented pressures, not least from the 'Brexit' result of the UK's referendum on EU membership in June 2016. In reflecting on these manifold challenges to the idea and space of Europe these interventions focus on three themes that have long animated political geography scholarship: borders, power and crises. Cross-cutting the interventions are two calls to action: to rethink our analytical approaches to Europe, and to reframe our role as critical scholars.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Fiona McConnell

Europe is facing challenging times. The so-called 'migration crisis' has seen the hardening and militarisation of Europe's land and maritime borders. Terror attacks have scarred cities across the continent, and the far right is in ascendancy in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Hungary, amongst others. Nationalist politicians are framing European states as being under siege from Islamist terrorists and economic migrants, which has led to a rise in xenophobia and casual racism on the streets of European cities. Meanwhile the Euro-zone has seen a series of employment crises and economic turmoil, the European Union is facing unprecedented pressures. The 'Brexit' result of the UK's referendum on EU membership in

June 2016 has led to profound uncertainty not only for the UK's relationship with Europe but also for the future of the Union itself (for analysis of Brexit see www.elsevier.com/connect/brexit-resource-centre).

At the best of times Europe is a vast and unwieldy topic. As was the case 25 years ago — another moment when a culmination of events warranted reflection on Europe's political futures — writing from the midst of geopolitical and geo-economic upheaval raises the challenge of how to gain perspective, to reflect on what is happening and to reassess how we approach issues. Yet as critical scholars it is imperative that we do so. In reflecting on the manifold challenges to the idea and space of Europe the interventions that follow are provocations: posing questions, unsettling taken for granted frameworks, and calling for new ways of thinking about and politically contributing to 'Europe'. Each author approaches Europe from a distinct perspective and offers a particular lens on contemporary European issues, bringing in ideas and framings from international relations, law, economic geography and migration studies. They also each draw on insights from their extensive empirical research in and on Europe. Cross-cutting the interventions are two calls to action: to rethink our analytical approaches to Europe, and to reframe our role as critical scholars.

* Corresponding author.
 E-mail addresses: Fiona.mcconnell@ouce.ox.ac.uk (F. McConnell), merje.kuus@geog.ubc.ca (M. Kuus), Asj38@cam.ac.uk (A. Jeffrey), heaven.crawley@coventry.ac.uk (H. Crawley), N.Vaughan-Williams@Warwick.ac.uk (N. Vaughan-Williams), a.m.smith@qmul.ac.uk (A. Smith).

The interventions make the case for a renewed analytical toolbox through a focus on three themes that have long animated political geography scholarship on Europe: borders, power and crises. The spatial politics of Europe is a topic that has consistently featured in the pages of this journal. Underpinning much of this work has been an interest in Europe's borders: their post-Cold War realignment, the differentiation between 'permeable' internal and 'fortress' external borders of the EU (Carr, 2012; Scott & van Houtum, 2009) and the Union's relationship with its neighbours (Bialasiewicz et al., 2009; Petrakos, Tsiapa, & Kallioras, 2016). The interventions by Smith and Vaughan-Williams speak to this work on Europe's borders, and, in drawing on the work of Balibar and Derrida respectively, do so in ways that bring to the fore vital questions of inclusion and exclusion, openness to the Other and violent closures. Vaughan-Williams calls for attention to be turned to the emergence of bordering practices that are enacted under the guise of humanitarian action in order to render 'irregular' populations 'knowable' and thus 'governable'. Meanwhile Smith argues that paying attention to borders as an intermingling of the geopolitical and geo-economic is crucial to mapping out emerging political geographies of difference, (uneven) development and power (lessness) in Europe today.

As illustrated by Smith's focus on inequality and marginalisation, the question of the nature of power in Europe runs through the interventions. Whilst much existing work has focused on the changing dynamics of EU 'soft' and 'civilian' power (e.g. Bachmann & Sidaway, 2009; Clark & Jones, 2008), Kuus argues that our conceptions of power are ill-suited for current political realities in Europe. In calling for more precision in our analytical categories she asserts that we need to extricate ourselves from the national-territorial trap that has so dominated writing on Europe and instead demarcate *trans*-national regulatory power. Advocating a different shift in how we approach 'Europe' Jeffrey argues that we should be less fixated on the *meaning* of Europe and turn critical attention to emphasising its *use*. In bringing to the fore questions of utility he sets Europe's political future alongside the future of international law, arguing that there is a mutually reinforcing functional and spatial relationship between them: addressing the future of European human rights law can provide leverage on the future modes of pan-European solidarity. Alongside borders and power, the interventions also turn critical attention to the notion of 'crisis', a term that has been widely discussed in the European context in recent years (e.g. Engelen, Hendrikse, Mamadouh, & Sidaway, 2011; Murphy, 2013). Focusing specifically on the 'migration crisis', Crawley's intervention draws attention to the political agendas that produce the framing of recent events as crises, including ongoing geopolitical disputes (e.g. in the Aegean) and national politicians seeking to consolidate power and further domestic agendas. This raises the question of what value there is in the concept of 'crisis'. Crises prompt action, but in the context of the 'migrant crisis' the dominant mode of 'doing something' is politically problematic.

It is precisely the imperative of 'doing something' in response to the perfect storm of Brexit, growing inequalities and a shift to introverted, nationalist politics in Europe, that this set of interventions also addresses. Progressive academic voices and interventions are certainly needed, but at a juncture where expertise is viewed with suspicion at best and contempt at worst, how can critical geographers carve out a space to be heard? As noted above, one suggestion promoted in these interventions is to change our analytical framings and the questions that we ask. To what extent does the current disenchantment with the status quo and with the political establishment provide opportunities to think differently about the way politics works? What role can and should geographers play in fostering alternative geographical imaginations that push back against parochial nationalism? In critiquing the lack of concern with normativity in critical geopolitical scholarship, Jeffrey argues that we need to take bolder ethical, moral and political stances. On the one hand we need to be more direct in our writing: we need to describe state behaviour and political agendas as we see them, to call out injustices, xenophobia and discrimination. On the other hand we need to turn our empirical attention to overlooked stories of solidarity, compassion and inclusion that provide counter-narratives to dominant media and political discourses (see Vaughan-Williams). Making connections — both conceptually and practically — between such movements, communities and actions has the potential to reimagine and enact a more progressive, open and inclusive Europe. With 2017 bringing the UK's withdrawal from the EU and elections in three of the six founder members of the European project (France, Germany and The Netherlands, each of which has populist Eurosceptic contenders), the need for such positive action could not be more timely.

Locating Europe's power, or the difference between passports and passporting

Merje Kuus

The stories we tell about Europe are only as insightful as the analytical tools that underpin them. Much of what is said about politics and identity in today's Europe is too general: it tells a catchy story with lots of villains, but it is largely a familiar story of national competition and national identity. In an effort to be more precise about our analytical categories, I probe the customary meanings of Europe and power in today's Europe. I underscore the insidious ways in which the conventional wisdom channels our thinking into a nation-based frame of power. The intervention consists of three points: the first concerns Europe, the second concerns power, and the third concerns our analysis of regulatory power. All draw on geographical research and my own study of European Union (EU) decision-making (Kuus, 2014).

'Will there still be Europe next year?' is the kind of small-talk query I have received for years now. 'Why not?' has become my stock answer. 'Where would the world's largest economy go?' My interlocutor may well cover up some discomfort at that point, as they associate Europe with economic troubles, not power, even when standing in a queue for EU passports. Although Brexit will take off over two trillion dollars from the union's Gross Domestic Product, I expect to continue confounding small-talk with some similar statistic—for mainstream media reports would lead one to believe that Europe is down the drain without the Brits. The widespread ignorance about the union's regulatory power—ignorance that pre-dates the Grexit, Dexit, or Brexit rhetoric by many years—is instructive of a broader blind spot in our political and geographical imagination.

Academics certainly know that the EU is a powerful trade bloc, but they too habitually discuss economic power in national terms. Although a consumer product in Europe is effectively governed by EU-wide standards—which contain heavy doses of governmental and private sector lobbying, are transposed into national law, and are implemented largely by national agencies—the popular image of that product remains wedded to nation-states. We view a Volkswagen car as a German rather than a European product. EU regulatory power, and regulatory power more broadly, remains largely out of view. There are no catchy logos for it. EU power is abstract even for the professionals tasked to advance it. In my work on diplomacy, representatives of the EU routinely mention that national diplomats are 'astonishingly' ignorant of what their EU counterparts actually do. An interviewee puts the difference between national and EU diplomats this way: 'An ambassador promotes trade; an EU ambassador creates the conditions in which