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‘City and Countryside in the Imagining of Nations’

When we look at maps illustrating the distributions of support for Donald Trump versus Hilary Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election¹, and of support for ‘Leave’ versus ‘Remain’ in the UK Brexit Referendum in 2016, we see a striking similarity. Support for Clinton and for Remain both appear as archipelagos of major cities and surrounding urban concentrations, poking up out of a sea of support for the opposite causes. City and countryside seem to define patterns of polarisation in both societies. Of course, these images indicate majorities in constituencies, the polarisation of opinion and support is more gradual than the image of ‘above and below the sea line’ suggests. Nonetheless, the underlying social tension, and its spatial expression, are real. In this essay I will argue that this can be seen as a symptom of the evolving problem of nation building, which has itself been altered by changing relations between city and countryside. Neoliberalism and globalisation have changed the terms of the relationship, in some ways eliding it altogether. But the central task of nation building, confronted by spatialised social tensions, persists. The currency of new notions of multiculturalism, and revived notions of civil society, reflect an increasingly urban-centric process of nation building, which nonetheless must re-forge relations with its hinterland.

I will explore the rural-urban divide in regard to the idea of the nation, and the recent rise of populist forms of politics in the early 21st century. About the latter I will limit my speculations to the two iconic cases I am more familiar with, support for Donald Trump’s presidency in the US, and for the project of Brexit in the UK. However, I am aware that the phenomenon is much more widespread and varied, and difficult to disarticulate from top-down projects of autocratic rule (e.g. the governments of Erdogan in Turkey, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Orbán in Hungary). Nonetheless I will try to place these two cases of populism, and their relationship to rural-urban tensions, in a longer historical context of ‘nation building’ (Bendix 1996, Deutsch 1953, Wimmer 2018), and how that has been altered by the political economic changes stemming from the 1970s. I will present this as two subsequent historical narratives, the first a period of classic nation building associated with the rise of the modern, centralised bureaucratic state, the second a period of what I will call ‘nation deconstructing’ associated with the recent period of economic globalisation and the hegemony of neoliberal policies (Harvey 2005, Mann 2013: 129-178). Before setting up this contrast, let me do some basic framing in regard to theories of nationalism and my two cases of populism, Trump and Brexit.

Ernest Gellner (1983), that seminal figure in the post-1970s study of nationalism, was famous for treating it as hinging on a great historical transition from agrarian empires to industrial states. From territories of relatively isolated peasant communities ruled over by narrow urban elites, to societies where all are much more integrated into a dynamic market economy, in which peasants have been transformed into mobile workers, and elite culture generalised to mass populations. In his celebrated historical study, Eugen Weber (1976) treated France as a type-case of the general process, in which developments in communications, education, linguistic standardisation, and militarily driven social mobility, transformed ‘peasants into Frenchmen’. These are just two expressions of a very general paradigm that has informed understandings of the rise of nationalism as involving the impact of the urban on the rural. However, Gellner’s version in particular is very broad brushed, and needs to be qualified in at least two ways. First, as always happens with such ideal-typical abstractions, the reality is not so clear cut. For instance, the US was still a largely agricultural economy well into the early 20th century, with almost 40% of employment being in agriculture as late as 1910. The

UK was peculiar in abandoning food self-sufficiency quite early as part of its precocious industrialisation (and France was somewhere in between) (Roser 2013). We should think of the process that Gellner was highlighting not as a sharp shift from rural to urban, or from agrarian to industrial, but as a changing relationship between these, in which the city was becoming the more dynamic partner when it came to generating employment. Second, Gellner's model tended to assume that once the agrarian-industrial transition had happened, the modern nation had been constructed, and the process was complete. The nation becomes part of the taken for granted furniture of modern life. I would argue instead that nation building is perennially unfinished business, that the legitimacy of the system of rule needs to be constantly renewed, as developments redistribute power and opportunity among society's members. Indeed, the liberal democratic form is precisely premised on the idea of a permanent debate about who 'the people' are, what their shared values are, and how they should govern each other (see Hearn 2006: 165-169, *passim*). This view fundamentally informs what follows.

Now for Trump and Brexit. Here the main qualification is that we need to be careful about what we mean by 'rural' and 'urban'. The polarisations of Trump versus Clinton, and Leave versus Remain, have been summarised through this shorthand, but it can be misleading in two ways, which I will expand upon in what follows, but outline briefly here. First, the 'rural' and the 'urban' are not what they used to be. Not only are sources of food much more transnational than they use to be (the US imports about 15% of its food, the UK just under half), but the replacement of agricultural labour by technology has drastically changed the structure of employment outside of big cities. Rural economies tend to combine low-employment agriculture, with some support industries, government sponsored projects such as forestry, and crucially in many places seasonal tourism and its various 'attractions' and support services. In turn, major cities are no longer the hubs of major industry they once were. Instead they are centres of regional government, finance and financial services, and myriad other private and public services and retail activities. Much industrial activity, especially in the capitalist core, has been relocated either abroad, or into smaller mid-sized towns, as part of projects of economic renewal. So, in the popular discourse about a new rural-urban divide contributing to populism, those many ailing, mid-sized, semi-industrial towns, are now often included in what we seem to mean by 'rural'. Second, and perhaps more simply, it has rarely been an equal partnership. Power concentrates in cities, which amass and coordinate resources, and have since their inceptions, dominated their hinterlands (Tilly 1992: ch 1). The basic point here is that the language of rural and urban, which can be applied over millennia of human history, can mask substantive changes of composition. Attending to those changes will help us get some analytic purchase on the 'rise of populism'.

Classic nation building

To avoid getting too diffuse, I will advance a general argument on the basis of my two cases (the UK and the US), allowing that further comparisons would probably complicate and modify my argument. Here and in the next section, my account will move from the political economy of the rural-urban relationship, to the cultural representations of that relationship.

Various aspects have been emphasised in the story of the British nation formation: Protestant identity, recurrent wars with (Catholic) France, global imperial conquest, and liberal economics (Colley 2009, Kumar 2015). But here let me focus on the question of integrating Britain, city and countryside, as a nation. In his *Wealth of Nations* in Book III (1981: 376-427) Adam Smith made the rural-urban relationship central to his historical analysis of how

Europe, especially England/Britain, managed to develop production, pulling itself out of the historical trap of cycles of agricultural crisis, by generalising prosperity and consumption to wider populations. Smith was keen to argue against a theory, associated with the French *Economistes* or 'Physiocrats', which maintained a fairly strict hierarchy of economic development, with agriculture seen as the foundation on which first manufactures and then trade emerge. He argued that Europe's 'unnatural' (1981: 380) path of economic growth worked in the other direction. It was driven by semi-autonomous towns and cities, preserved from the Roman period, that kept manufacturing and trade alive through the middle ages, eventually expanding as commerce grew, in turn generating pools of capital that were invested back into agricultural improvement, causing population growth and further growth in manufactures and trade. It is this virtuous circle of economic growth between city and countryside that first underwrote the growth of the evolving core nation states in the modern period. For generations the rural hinterlands of modern nation states thrived on supplying food to cities, shedding excess populations into cities and imperial outposts. And in turn cities supplied growing markets and sources of further capital investment.

Through the 19th and most of the 20th centuries this reciprocal relationship was accompanied by the institutional integration of the rural and the urban. National systems of schooling spread across the landscape, often more effectively for the denizens of small agricultural towns than for the urban labouring poor. Rural dialects were assimilated to and measured against dominant urban forms. Standardisation of curricula and narratives around such things as national history helped shape a more unified worldview. Older systems in which rural magnates and elites operated local systems of law in their own interests were increasingly subsumed under national regimes of law. And successive waves of advances in communications—roads and canals, postal systems, telegraphs and telephones, news services---pulled entire regions together, not effacing the rural urban divide, but giving each its place in a major axis of the division of labour (Deutsch 1953).

As already suggested, across this period class structure was steadily changing. As a proportion of sectoral employment, agriculture in Britain had reduced to a smaller overall proportion than manufacturing already by 1800. Whereas in the US the growth of manufacturing employment did not begin to equal and overtake agriculture until the early 20th century. But over the long term, up to the present, both are steadily displaced as a proportion by the 'service sector' (a very broad category), which is now about 80% in both countries, the vast bulk of the remainder of employment being in manufactures (Ortiz-Ospina and Lippolis 2017). But for our first period of 'nation building', up to about 1970, boosted by post-World War Two economic expansion, demographic flow from the shrinking sectors into the growing service sector, supported a sense of prosperity and upward mobility. A new kind of larger and more heterogeneous middle class took shape in both countries, associated with this growth of the diverse service sector. And this was correspondingly associated with the steady movement of populations from the countryside into the cities (Ibid.).

Many aspects of high and popular culture from the late 19th to the mid-20th century reflected attempts to grapple with the rural-urban relationship. Familiar, dualistic conceptual mainstays of early sociology are a case in point. Henry Maine's (1986) legal studies of a shift from 'status' to 'contract', Ferdinand Tönnies' (2001) contrasts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and Emile Durkheim's (1964) shift from 'mechanical' to 'organic' solidarity, all attempted to grasp aspects of the rural-urban relationship, and the social disruptions of movement from one to the other. These ideas were generally framed as describing a longer historical shift from 'traditional' to 'modern' society, but their salience for these theorists and

their audiences surely had to do with a sense that they were not just historical but currently relevant, as people could see tensions and adjustments between these principles all about them.

More popular forms of culture also expressed this relationship. For instance in Scotland in Britain, where this shift was experienced perhaps a bit later than in the south of England, there developed a specific form of popular literature known as the 'Kailyard School' (1880-1914). A particular variant on the *Bildungsroman*, these stories characteristically featured the trials and tribulations of a talented and promising young man from a small 'toun' as he makes his way in the modern city, only to return home, wiser for the experience, and newly appreciating values and relationships of home (Nash 2007). This attempt to accept the rural-urban relationship, and revalorise while sentimentalising the rural can be found in many other national variants on this pattern. The present author remembers from his childhood in America a diet of reruns of 1960s television shows that revolved around this same dilemma of how the city perceived the countryside. Popular TV shows such as 'The Beverly Hillbillies', 'Green Acres' and 'The Andy Griffith Show', found humour by playing on an ambiguous combination of condescension and sentimental admiration for the moral and practical good sense of rural folk, not corrupted by urban sophistication. This could only make sense as a brand of popular humour for mass consumption if it somehow was recognisable. And indeed, the middle years of the 20th century in the US especially, were ones in which many of the urban viewers could remember the way of life being parodied and sentimentalised, either through their own life trajectories, or family connections and memories. These narratives provided a way of reaching across a social divide, and processing a sense of a vanishing way of small town agriculturally based life. It was a way of constructing a shared national identity, even as its composition was fundamentally changing.

Nation Deconstructing

In the last fifty years, we have moved through a new period in which, manufacturing sectors have gone into decline, and in some places crisis, while employment in entire societies has been almost swallowed up by the capacious category of the 'service sector', which contains and occludes profound degrees of social stratification, from high end financial specialists, high tech experts, and professionals (doctors, lawyers, scientists, professors), to low end precarious jobs in hospitality, cleaning, delivery and transportation. This restructuring corresponds to economic globalisation in which many manufacturing jobs have moved away and overseas from the US and the UK, and as legal and illegal labour migration has helped undercut the bargaining power of these transformed working classes in the old core. The Smithian division of labour between town and countryside has been undercut, with agriculture providing very little employment, and agricultural products bought and sold on much more international markets (Herrendorf et al. 2014).

The schooling of the previous period has rightly been criticised for its myth-making representations of the forming nation, and its many exclusions from, or biased accounts of, history. In the US the idea of the 'melting pot' reigned (Glazer and Moynihan 1970, Herberg 1960), in which diverse religious and ethnic groups were assimilated to a core national identity modelled on a white, British and northern European standard. The continuing legacy of slavery and racism were obscured by a narrative of post-Civil War reconciliation between the North and South, and romanticising of the South's 'Lost Cause'. And fear of atheistic communism in the USSR and its clients further unified society in the Post-World War Two years (Katznelson 2013). More recent decades, in the wake of the 1960s civil rights

movements in both the US and the UK, have seen a salutary critique of much of this earlier nation building-history, focussing on the many patterns of discrimination and exclusion that underlay this social order. While regionally varied and often contested, especially in more urban and progressive school districts, an approach to national history that was more a matter of collective-soul searching in regard to historical injustices, than national mythologising, became much more normal (see, e.g. Hannah-Jones 2019, Magness 2020). In recent years young people have been increasingly socialised into a very different vision of the social landscape, one characterised by problems of disunity and injustice within the nation, in which identity politics is a major frame of interpretation, and controversial ideas of ‘political correctness’ and ‘wokeness’ are at stake. This new narrative carries on into much liberal college and university education, which as we know, is one of the key experiences distinguishing Trumpians from Clintonians, and Leavers from Remainers (Silver 2016, Swales 2016).

Patterns of communication have also been altered. Benedict Anderson (2006) argued that the spread of literacy and the printed word through new markets of reading publics was crucial to the original imagining of modern nations as communities. As suggested above, by the middle of the 20th century broadcast media were generating regional and national diets of programming on radio and then television, that provided a common focus for the public imagination. Agencies like the BBC saw themselves as having a mission of national education and uplift. However, the rise of personal everyday computing power along with satellite-based communications has fundamentally changed the communicational dynamics. Rather than the mass of society ‘receiving’ shared, nationally framed images and messages, instead entertainment viewing, whether on Netflix or YouTube or some other content deliverer, is on demand, according to personal taste. As has often been observed, email and countless social media platforms individualise paths of communication, as these technologies also serve the purpose of generating bespoke market information to be sold to third parties (Turkle 2017). All the while, the print news media, once one of the cornerstones of national communications, has gone into steady decline (Rusbridger 2018). Moreover, we shouldn’t forget the other meaning of ‘communication’ as the movement of people and things. The spread of the automobile facilitated the circulation of people, but largely within the nation state horizons, visiting sites of recreation and national beauty, and relatives ‘back home’ in small towns. With the cheapening and expansion of air travel however, middle classes are now more likely to travel abroad for tourism and recreation, dropping in briefly on other cultures, perhaps as part of a group of like-minded friends, rather than circulating within the national sphere, traversing the urban-rural divide.

Social mobility and the growth of the middle class has stalled in this period. This is partly because in previous decades social mobility was largely measured in terms of movement from ‘blue collar’ manufacturing work to ‘white collar’ professional/service sector work (Goldthorpe 2016: 95-96). But as the vast majority of employment is now in the highly variegated service sector, this pattern is largely exhausted. As already suggested, the major class divisions now exist within the service sector. Add to this the erosion of working conditions and job security associated with the decline of trade union power, the stagnation of middle-class incomes, and meteoric rise in incomes at the very top of the wealth hierarchy, and it becomes clear that participation in an expanding national economy is no longer the unifying project it once was. While inequality does strain the social fabric, this is not just a matter of wealth distribution, but also of a sense of inclusion in a shared world of valued and stable employment. The effects of this process are compounded by national housing markets increasingly out of the reach of young people ready to set up households, especially since the

crash of property markets in 2008. To be sure, this basic shift in class structure and dynamics cuts across the rural-urban divide. Ethnically diverse working classes in the growing cities experience precarity as much as underemployed rural workers in stagnating small towns. Again, the difference is not so much one of class in the broadest sense, as one of experience and perception, and of orienting values. But these latter are nonetheless connected to how one sits in the overall division of labour, one's sense of one's interests and prospects in regard to the wider economy (Cramer 2016, Goodhart 2017, Lind 2020).

Regarding popular representations of the rural-urban relationship, what is striking is not so much an axis of hostility, as the relative disappearance of the symbolic relationship compared to the previous nation building period. Obviously, there are all kinds of real and symbolic tensions expressed in the social polarisations captured by Trump's presidency and Brexit, but as the polls tell us, these are about several things: age, levels of education, race and ethnicity, religion, and so on, not just the rural-urban axis. The supposed rural-urban tensions have become visible through patterns of voting behaviour, catching many observers off guard. But what is noticeable in popular culture is the elision of a tension that was routinely represented, however sympathetically, in the earlier period. The rural appears as a place of natural beauty, archaeological interest, passing attention, but not so much as a way of life, vanishing or not. One exception in the UK is the long-running radio drama 'The Archers' on Radio 4, a station whose listenership leans heavily towards the urban, well-educated, Remain end of the spectrum. The Archers, first broadcast in 1951, follows the ups and downs various farm families in the imaginary village of Ambridge, and was originally formulated as a show with a specific remit to disseminate important information about rural farming life to a wider public. In other words, it was a product of that earlier conjunction of nation building and broadcast media. But today's listeners are mostly very distant from a farm-based, or even rural lifestyle.

Returning to the realm of television drama and comedy, while representations of urban working-class people are not uncommon, small town life as a frame for humour or drama, while not absolutely absent, is increasingly rare, especially if the setting is present day. The rural is usually seen as a place that more urban protagonists (e.g. police detectives) must go to sometimes in the interests of plot. On the one hand, there is little representation of the rural-urban relationship as such, on the other, for all the reasons of current means of communication discussed above, the difference itself is elided. The rural today is no longer an 'other' place, the symbolic opposite of the city, it is more the far outer margins of the city. Everyone has a cell phone, a computer, a car, watches Netflix. In a sense, there is only one way of life left (cf. Buttel 2001, Fulkerson and Thomas 2013). But some people seem to live their lives close to the centre of it, partaking of the city's dynamism and prestige, while others are located in its periphery, in a slightly dreary, downtrodden side-life, where people can still be stalwart and admirable, but are seldom 'where it's at'. As discussed above, the options for employment and housing in rural areas are on the whole different, and people clearly identify on average in more socially conservative ways, so there are differences. But this is more a difference in the social and economic prospects facing people in major metropolitan centres versus declining towns and rural areas, than between two 'cultures', one urban, the other rural.

Discussion

Having framed this as a contrast between two periods, one 'classic nation building', the other 'nation deconstructing', I might be understood to be supporting the kinds of arguments that

were prevalent in the early days of the ‘globalisation’ literature, in which the ‘end of the nation state’ was breezily forecast (e.g. Held 1996, cf. Hall 2000). But that is far from my position. The global nation state system, and thus the perennial problems of nation building, are built deeply into the world’s political economy, something very evident in the nationally framed responses to the coronavirus crisis that has shaped the global pandemic at the time of writing this essay. Predictions of the nation state’s death are grossly exaggerated. However, as the economies and political power balances within states evolve, the basic terms of nation building shift. As labouring populations outside of major cities (agriculture, but also mining and other industries) have been whittled down and largely replaced with a rural wing of the service sector, and urban industrial workers have been rechannelled into myriad jobs around the knowledge economy, commerce, and consumption, an older sense of a reciprocal (though sometimes fraught) relationship between city and countryside, as parts of a unified national division of labour, has decayed. It is no longer an object, or problematic, of nation building. Meanwhile that problematic has migrated into a different frame, more concerned with how to imagine an ethnically, racially and religiously diverse nation, without invoking a strong principle of assimilation. This frame also attends to the membership rights of both sexes, and various sexualities and gender identities. Thus the narrative of nation building has not ended, but its focus has shifted to the terrain of multiculturalism, to a different problem of how to build a unified nation (Barry 2002, Modood and Werbner 1997, Parekh 2002).

In this context, of what I am describing as a new multicultural nation building project, some efforts to make sense of the Trump and Brexit phenomena have seen it primarily as a reactionary expression of resurgent racism, a backlash against feminism and the promotion of women’s rights, and in the UK, as a kind of British imperial nostalgia that seeks to turn back the clock to a more ethnically and racially homogenous society (Bhambra 2017, Patel and Connelly 2019). This has led to a rather unproductive opposition of explanations based on ‘racism’, as an expansive ideology, versus ‘class’, as a complex of economically grounded interests. Clearly both racism and class interests are involved, but neither provide a magic key on its own to unlock the causes of these events. As I’ve tried to suggest throughout this essay, the rural-urban divide cannot be reduced to a simple class divide (and perhaps less so than in the past). But there are interests, and senses of identity, that attach to places and the livelihoods they afford, and there is a palpable pattern of alienation in many more rural areas that feel relatively stagnant. It is also the case that ethnic and racial diversity is concentrated in cities, and to some degree this becomes a marker in rural perceptions of the urban. But that doesn’t make race the central issue. I’ve tried to suggest that as cities have continued to grow, the endless project of nation building has shifted its focus, from the rural-urban relationship, to more characteristically urban problems of national integration. Rural and small-town folk have been not so much ‘left behind’ as marginalised in the unavoidable and ever-problematic discussion of ‘who we are’ as a nation.

This essay is trying to think about the onward march of ‘urbanisation’, not just in the narrow sense of cities growing and people moving into them, but in the wider sense, concomitant with globalisation, of the entire world becoming one big city. Despite profound divisions of political and economic interests shaped by territorial states, the traffic of commodities and ideas between major global cities, increasingly foreshadows one huge macro-city that girdles the globe (see Brenner 2019, Ritchie 2018). It is a global space in which elites and the more affluent strata on the one hand, and work-seeking and politically displaced populations on the other, have circulated to unprecedented degrees. Driven on by globalisation and neoliberalism, this global network now overlays the system of nation states. But that doesn’t mean it can erase that system, because those states are still the main framework within which

people make claims on each other about basic social provisioning, and moral and legal obligations and rights. It is still the main framework within which they mobilise around interests, and contest distributions of power. This is perhaps why we see the current wave of national populisms around the globe, each with its own particular variant of tensions between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ interests.

In recent decades the concept of ‘civil society’ has been revived and extended (Hall 1995, Edwards 2004). Revived as a framework for thinking about social mobilisation around issues and interests, and ‘progressive’ social change, and extended to the global domain to account for the role of various international bodies that operate at the interstices of states, supposedly helping to forge a genuinely global society of shared interests. Achieving this latter goal still seems a long way off. But in the present context it is perhaps instructive to meditate on the longstanding affiliations of the concept with the ‘civilising’ effects of the city and commerce, bringing to heel more rural and martial ways of life, and establishing the rule of law across the land. In the 18th century, before modern democracy was fully conceived, and before dynastic and imperial states had evolved into more recognisable nation states, this was the original nation building project. Bringing the countryside under the benevolent influence of the city (a process regarded with some regret by Adam Ferguson (1966) in 1767). From the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries, in the heyday of classic nation building, the term fell out of fashion in elite discourse, replaced by languages of class conflict (Marx) and the functional integration of society (Durkheim), understood at least implicitly to be problems of the nation state, or at least practically focused at that level. The return of ‘civil society’, now often ‘global civil society’ (Kaldor 2003) is perhaps a symptom of the global urbanisation referred to above. And although the domination of urban life may be inexorable, and bring with it some values we want to promote, it’s perhaps not surprising that the somewhat condescending civilising mission of the city in regard to the countryside continues to antagonise people who feel themselves marginal to that centre. But as I’ve tried to suggest throughout this essay, given the transformations of that relationship, and the deep and global interconnections of contemporary capitalism, perhaps we are talking about people who are not so much ‘rural’ as encamped just outside the city walls, and with more in common than we realise with those struggling to survive within those walls. Those living in the castle, however, are much more distant from all the rest.

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¹ The 2020 US Presidential election was held after this chapter was written. However, its results reaffirm the spatial polarisation of party support discussed here.