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Nation and Negation (Terrible Rage)

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Abstract: The aftermath of the Brexit referendum has revealed a deeply divided Britain, with anger on both sides and seemingly little desire to seek compromise or mutual understanding. Remainers denounce Leavers as ignorant bigots. Leavers denounce Remainers as metropolitan elitists. Theresa May went even further, characterizing supporters of open borders and free movement as ‘citizens of nowhere’ whose lack of attachment to nation suggests they simply don’t understand what citizenship means. Given the UK’s regional correlation between high levels of theatregoing and high support for Remain, this is a challenge for theatre-makers and scholars. One strong feature of contemporary British playwriting is a detachment from place; in numerous recent plays, place is estranged, unspecified, annulled, orphaned, globalized, generalized, combined, relativized and scenographically anonymized. Does this represent an absence of nation? No, because this would be to accept the rigid oppositions of the Leave campaign between nations and open borders, between the local and the global. Instead, there is a restless deconstructive movement within the very identification of nation that moves to transcend it and this is captured and embodied in the heterotopic ambiguities of the spatially specific performance of the placeless play.

Keywords: theatre, playwriting, dramaturgy, Brexit, European Union, space, place, nation, state, globalization, heterotopia, David Goodhart, Dani Rodrik, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jeremy Bentham, Michel Foucault, Joanne Tompkins

Caryl Churchill can tell the future. *Top Girls* was a magnificent commentary on the 1980s, written at the beginning, not the end, of the decade. *Mad Forest* anatomized the complex struggles of the former Eastern bloc countries with capitalism throughout the 1990s, despite being written in 1990. And clearly the most imaginative play about the 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’ was *Far Away*, first performed in November 2001, a full ten months before the World Trade Centre was destroyed. So when I went to see *Escaped Alone*, early in 2016, it was with the thought that this might be a preview of what was to come.

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The play is filled with horrific visions. Scenes in an idyllic English suburban garden are interrupted by soliloquies describing chaotic scenes of extraordinary, world-encircling brutality, in a tone both comic and despairing. For the most part, the garden scenes are protected from this, anxiety only seeming to peek out in the private traumas of the gathered women's own stories: but almost at the very end of the play, Mrs Jarrett, the woman who has been our guide, the play's Virgil into this tranquil hell, speaks out loud, to whom it is not clear, and her words are:

MRS JARRETT. Terrible rage terrible rage. (42)

Linda Bassett's performance of these words was determined, harsh, insistent, the repetitions cascading into each other and becoming, it seemed to me, another final image of hell. At the time, however, I took the speech to be capturing righteous anger at our failed austerity politics or perhaps warning of those bubbling forces of racism and nationalism the signs of which we could already see. What I could not know is that Churchill had in fact predicted my own feelings.

From the moment, early in the morning on Friday 24 June 2016, when it became clear that Britain had narrowly voted in favour of leaving the European Union, I have been horrified by the depths of my own rage – at my fellow citizens, at the cravenness of our political class, at the impenitent stupidity of the media, at the poverty of our public conversation.

Churchill's speech expresses well why I describe these feelings in terms of horror. The word 'terrible' has a sharp ambivalence; it both serves as an intensifier (the rage is terribly powerful), but also to diminish it (it's not good, it's *terrible*). I have been surprised by the intensity of these feelings; I am disturbed by how easily my rage at the UK's decision can overwhelm understanding, subtlety and nuance. And this is why it is terrible in the pejorative sense. Since the referendum, I have found myself defending the European Union far beyond its merits. To listen to me sometimes, you would think it a peerlessly efficient and democratic institution, that the Single Market operates for the unalloyed good of the EU's citizens, and that the Euro was wisely established, competently run, and shines with political legitimacy (none of which, in my cooler moments, do I think are uncomplicatedly true [see Hennette *et al.*]). Even the unstructured repetitions of Mrs Jarrett's speech capture the Sisyphean monotony of these feelings: every day brings us a new Brexit stupidity and still nothing changes, in the political situation or in me.

More importantly, this rage is terrible because it has become very easy to dismiss too many of my fellow citizens as bigots or racists or xenophobes or just

plain ignorant. I want to think again about the theatre's relationship to the Brexit debate, but from there widen out to consider more broadly how contemporary playwriting has conceptualized and extended our cultural conversation about the meaning and function of nationhood – and its negation.

Capital accumulation

The claim that Brexit was voted for by the ignorant has some evidence to support it. In a post-Referendum analysis, the conservative pollster Michael Ashcroft found a clear correlation between level of formal educational attainment and likelihood to vote Remain (see fig 1.). This is supported by other academic analysis of the voting patterns (e.g. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 151–153). Put simply, the less educated you were the more likely you were to vote to leave the EU. This might seem to be in line with the Leave campaign's apparent disregard for facts and expertise: they notoriously decorated a campaign bus with a false¹ claim that the UK sends £350m to the EU every week, money that would be spent on the NHS instead, and Michael Gove infamously declared that “people in this country have had enough of experts.”² As such, we might simply conclude that voting for Brexit was a stupid thing to do.³

1 The UK's net contribution is more like £137m, much of which would be cancelled out by the depressive effects on GDP of leaving the EU, and few of the Leave campaigners had any real intention to spend this dividend on public services (ONS Digital; Armstrong and Portes; Begg and Mushövel; Helm).

2 See Mance. It should be noted that Gove was interrupted; he seems to have been going on to say “[...] from organizations with acronyms saying that they know best.” (By “acronyms” he is responding to the interviewer's litany of anti-Brexit organizations: the IFS, IMF, CBI and so on.) So the remark is not quite a categorically anti-intellectual as it might seem, though Gove has accepted that his remarks resonated effectively with some of the public in their misrepresented form (Runciman).

3 There were similar trends in the 2016 US Presidential Election, the 2017 French Presidential Election and the 2017 UK General Election. In each instance, the less educated you were, the more likely you were to vote for the conservative/right-wing choice (see: Curtis; Huang *et al.*; Burn-Murdoch *et al.*).

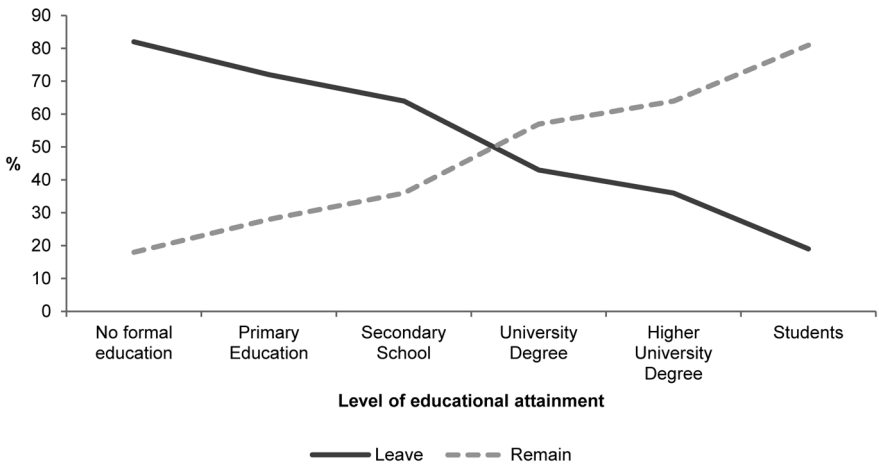


Fig. 1: EU Referendum votes by level of educational attainment; Source: Ashcroft

But this is the wrong way to interpret this data. Rather than treat education as a marker of capacity, I want to suggest we see it as a form of human capital; those in possession of such capital voted for Brexit, those deprived of it voted against. How might other forms of capital line up with Referendum voting patterns?

We can look at income. One way of tracking this is to divide Britain into its regions and nations. If we compare Gross Domestic Household Income by region (GDHI, a per capita measure of net spending power after taxes and benefits) with the regional referendum vote, we see a clear correlation for most of England (see fig. 2).⁴ London, the region with the highest GDHI, is also the region with the highest Remain vote. Three of the four regions with the lowest GDHI are also three of the four regions with the lowest Remain vote.

Outside England, there is much greater variation. In particular, Northern Ireland, despite being the poorest region of the UK, returned one of the highest Remain votes at 55.8 %. It is likely that this reflects the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland with its land border with the Republic, the intimate connection between the Good Friday Agreement and EU membership and significant EU regional funding per capita. Scotland, meanwhile, has a GDHI of £18,315, below the national average of £19,106, yet the region as a whole produced the highest Remain vote in the UK. One might speculate that this is due to the cultural significance of Scottish nationalism for which EU membership has long functioned as “an attractive alternative to

⁴ The most recent GDHI figures available are from 2015, a year *before* the Brexit vote, though the variation between the years is insignificant for my purposes here.

remaining in the UK” (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 160), but also that Scottish nationalism acts as a bulwark against the cruder nativism that fuelled anti-EU feeling elsewhere in the UK. With those exceptions, however, there is a strong positive correlation between spending power and voting remain.

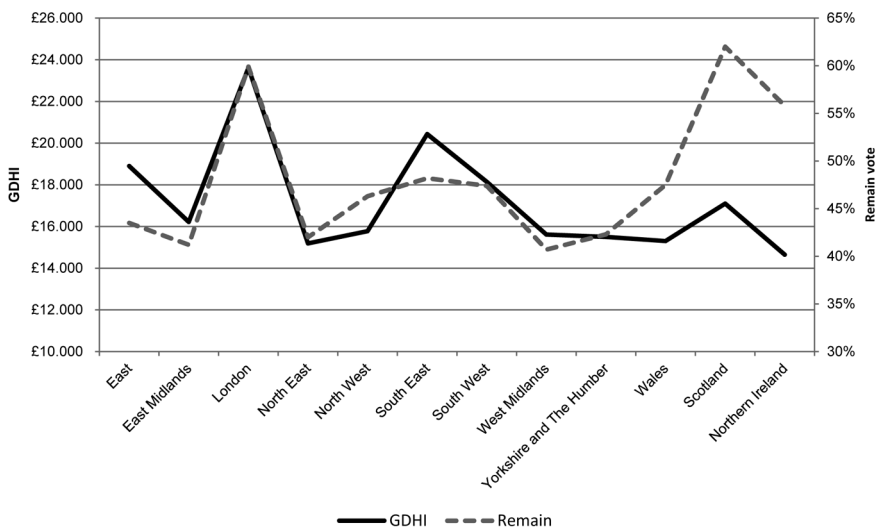


Fig. 2: Regional GDHI & Remain vote; Source: Office for National Statistics; “EU Referendum” (BBC News).

We can also compare regional patterns of theatregoing with the likelihood of voting Remain. I and my colleagues in the British Theatre Consortium have gathered substantial data on theatregoing in our *British Theatre Repertoire* reports.⁵ Fig. 3 plots the Remain vote by region against numbers of regional theatre visits per capita. The correlation between the two indicators is less apparent, but it should be borne in mind that the theatregoing figures are by theatre and not household, which is significant because people do not exclusively go to the theatre in their own region. The West Midlands is a good example, appearing to contradict any correlation, but the high theatre attendance figures are partly due to the presence of the RSC in that region, which draws in attendances from regions across

⁵ See Brownlee, Edgar, and Rebellato. Again, the years don’t match exactly: the latest available theatre-going data is from 2014, but for my purposes here I consider it unlikely that there will prove to have been any statistically significant change between 2014 and 2016.

the country. (This is even truer of London.⁶) With some exceptions, then, there is a broad correspondence between the patterns of theatregoing and voting Remain.

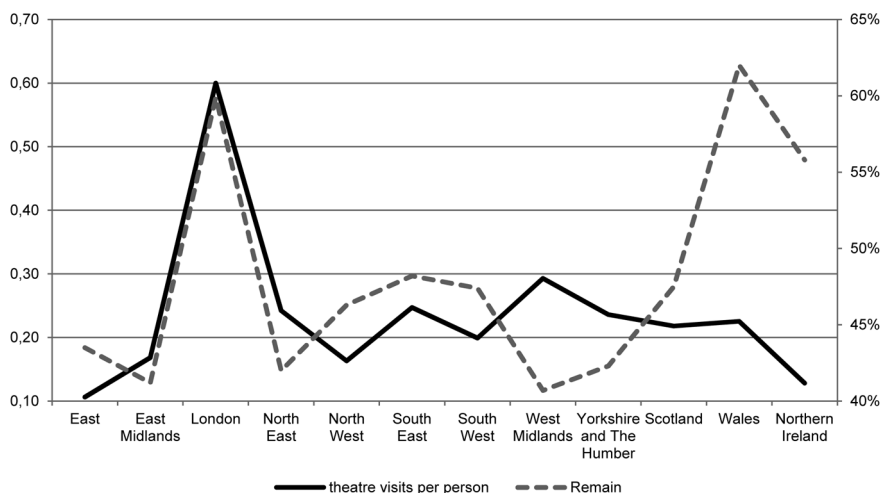


Fig. 3: Theatre visits per person & Remain vote by region; Source: Brownlee, Edgar, and Rebellato; “EU Referendum” (BBC News)

These figures are snapshots and more would be needed for a complete analysis; nonetheless, they suggest a concentration of human, financial and cultural capital that lines up with the Remain vote. Rather than seeing voting for Brexit as an ignorant decision, it may be more important to understand it as an expression of capital deprivation: in turn, this should lead us to ask if the vote to Remain in the EU was the political choice of the capital-rich? In the theatre (and, to an extent, in the university sector), we have been accustomed to seeing ourselves as politically on the left, in opposition to the capitalist class, but these figures entitle us to ask ourselves, which side are we on?⁷

⁶ Similarly, the rate of theatregoing in London is significantly higher than anywhere else in the country, very largely because of international and international tourism. In fact, to make the chart legible, I have had to artificially reduce the London figure. Outside London, there are on average 0.2 theatre visits per capita. In London, there are 1.79 visits. In other words, London has more theatre visits per person by a factor of around nine. On this chart I have represented that factor as three.

⁷ I say ‘we’ and ‘us,’ in the assumption that those reading this article will, like me, have been Remain voters or supporters of EU membership. Is that rash? Probably not. Polls at the time of the

Anywhere

This would seem to support a certain line of analysis coming from the pro-Brexit right. In her speech to the Conservative Party conference in 2016, Prime Minister Theresa May, a latter-day convert to Brexit, mocked those who were surprised by the result of the referendum:

They find your patriotism distasteful, your concerns about immigration parochial, your views about crime illiberal, your attachment to your job security inconvenient.

They find the fact that more than seventeen million voters decided to leave the European Union simply bewildering.

Because if you're well off and comfortable, Britain is a different country and these concerns are not your concerns.

The three paragraphs suggest in turn (a) it is liberals (b) who don't understand ordinary Brexit voters (c) because they are wealthy. Elsewhere she pushes the point further:

too many people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with the people down the road, the people they employ, the people they pass in the street.

But if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means. (Theresa May)

This supplements the idea of the elite with the damning suggestion that they owe no loyalty to place, unlike, one supposes, the honest Brexiteer. This is an unfortunate speech in various ways: not least because there are dangerous historical precedents to denouncing a "small, rootless, international clique [...] who are at home both nowhere and everywhere" (Roberts 30). Theresa May was throwing herself into a dark current of European politics.

However, more immediately, the ideas in this speech appear to have derived from those of David Goodhart, via the Prime Minister's joint chief of staff Nick Timothy, known to be an enthusiast for Goodhart's analysis. In his recent book, *The Road to Somewhere*, Goodhart argues that there is a great fault-line in British society between two groups that he calls "Somewheres" and "Anywheres." Somewheres are people with a strong attachment to place, to locality, to nationhood. They are somewhat more socially conservative and have "ascribed" identities,

Referendum suggested that 89 % of UK university staff would vote Remain (Morgan) and a survey of its members by the Creative Industries Federation found 95 % support for Remain (Dawood). Most people reading this will be in higher education or the arts, perhaps both, so statistically I am among friends, or, put another way, we are all in the liberal bubble.

attached to particular groups and locations, which makes them unsettled by rapid social and cultural change. As a result, they tend to live close to where they grew up. Their outlook, says Goodhart, may be described as “decent populism” (6).

Anywheres, by contrast, place “a high value on autonomy, mobility and novelty and a much lower value on group identity, tradition and national social contracts [...] they see themselves as citizens of the world” (5). As a result, they are comfortable with things like immigration, human rights legislation, and European integration, and are relatively unconcerned if that seems to dilute national identity. Their outlook, he says, may be described as “progressive individualism” (5).

Goodhart’s is not a well-argued book. It relies mainly on assertions and impressionistic generalizations about groups of people. The argument, such as it is, seems vague and tendentious. As David Edgar has pointed out, by noting the dramatic national shift towards Anywhere values, it provides ample evidence to disprove its own argument about Britain’s irreconcilably divided values (5). That said, the book’s attempt to characterize (in my terms) the capital-poor as having not worse values but different values is a helpful reminder of what may lie outside the liberal bubble. It is also another voice suggesting that a new fault-line may place left-wing academics and theatre-makers on the same side as the forces of global capital, as when he says that Anywheres have “a left-of-centre wing – in caring professions like health and education, and the media and creative industries – and a right-wing centre in finance, business and traditional professions like law and accountancy” (24). If nothing else, it is a book that asks us what side we are – and want to be – on.

Theatrical placelessness

Personal attitudes are one thing, but how far is this non-attachment to place expressed theatrically? It is often said that the theatre’s unrepeatable particularity expresses a kind of localism (a Somewhere attitude), in comparison to the weightless iterability of digital music or television. It is possible, of course, that theatre-makers’ ideas are at odds with the medium in which they work.

The role of place in British theatre is ambiguous. Most theatre requires an audience to attend in one place and one time to see a non-repeatable event and, as such, the theatre would seem to express a kind of localism (a Somewhere attitude). On the other hand, happenings and *impro* aside, most theatre production *are* broadly repeatable and *are* repeated, in runs and repertory seasons. They are also moveable and are moved, in transfers and tours. While going to a theatre involves a commitment to place, it is characteristic of much theatre that, by stepping into it, one takes a step into a subjunctive, liminal mode, part-disconnected from the

outside world. This is true even in the forms of theatre that might seem most obviously localist: in site-specific theatre, for example, while we might explore a real place and its history, we often do so in that same subjunctive mode, seeing it imaginatively, differently. It is, in that old Formalist sense, *estranged* or *distanced*, and to distance oneself from the local cannot be entirely a localist strategy.

But how does a sense of place express itself in contemporary playwriting? Of course, British playwriting is extremely varied and I would not want to suggest that all playwrights share a single approach to place. Instead, I will demonstrate that over the last few years there has been a persistent pattern of dramaturgical displacement among a great many playwrights, whereby particularities of place are problematized or eliminated. This does not cover all playwrights, and there are many important writers in whose plays place maintains a strong presence (for example Lucy Kirkwood, Roy Williams and David Eldridge). It seems to me that this pattern is fairly recent and most of my examples are from this decade, though it will sometimes be appropriate to look a little further back to identify plays that were particularly influential in this trend.

Mike Bartlett's play *Bull* (Crucible Studio, Sheffield, February 2013) begins exactly like this:

ISOBEL You've got...
 THOMAS What?
 ISOBEL You've got something just...
 THOMAS What?
 ISOBEL No the other side.
 THOMAS There?
 ISOBEL Yes. No it's still there. (5)

There is no indication of location whatever. Although we probably come to think the play is taking place in an office environment of some kind, Bartlett does not specify this and instead launches his play out of the white space at the top of the page.

This is a not-uncommon trope in contemporary playwriting. This is the opening of Sam Steiner's *Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons* (Walrus: Warwick Arts Centre, January 2015):

They speak slowly and quietly.
 OLIVER Thirty-four.
 BERNADETTE Twenty-one. (5)

We know what the characters say and how they speak, but not where they are. It is striking that even in plays that are centrally concerned with place often absent place from the page. Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* (Metal Rabbit & Supporting

Wall: Tobacco Factory, Bristol, February 2015) is in part a violent satire about the housing market and centres on a couple describing the lengths to which they go to secure their dream home. This is how the play begins:

OLLIE and JILL, late twenties.
 JILL is holding a baby.
 JILL Hello, I'm Jill.
 OLLIE And I'm Ollie.
 JILL This is our son Benjy.
 OLLIE We'd like to tell you about our home. (5)

Again, the characters are named, their relationship is established, and place is evoked but at least on the page it is unspecified. Martin Crimp's *Play House* (Orange Tree Theatre, March 2012) also focuses on a young couple setting up home and omits any textual description of that home.

The spatial politics of the dramaturgy can be clarified by reference to Mark Ravenhill's *Birth of a Nation* (Royal Court Theatre, April 2008, part of the *Shoot, Get Treasure, Repeat* cycle), in which a group of performers come to work with the inhabitants of a ruined city:

A team of Artist-Facilitators.
 — Your city is in ruins
 — We're being honest about – we're not trying to hide that. Your city is ...
 — A civilisation. An old civilisation is shattered. (199)

The satirical impulse of the play lies in the juxtaposition of the artist-facilitators' generic talk of healing and rebuilding and their evident lack of affinity for this particular place, and this is perhaps signalled textually by the lack of any stage direction specifying location. That might encourage us to think that the dramaturgical non-place is being deployed as part of a Somewhere critique of Anywheres, though this interpretation is hard to sustain across the whole cycle of plays, almost all of which are similarly denuded of spatial reference. One might also note that while a play like *Radiant Vermin* does not explicitly specify its location, it becomes clear through the dialogue. This may be true though the lack of specificity explicitly seems to permit a new production to play against that apparent location; in addition, this means that the location emerges only through words, which evoke place as an object of imagination rather than signifying a real-world referent.⁸

⁸ This sheer absence of stage directions specifying place can be found across a range of plays too numerous to list exhaustively but include David Eldridge's *Incomplete and Random Acts of*

More emphatic is the absence of place insisted upon by Martin Crimp in *The City* (Royal Court Theatre, April 2008), which begins with the peremptory command:

Time
Blank
Place
Blank (135)

Typical of Crimp, this instruction is itself ambiguous, specifying an attitude to place by not specifying place.⁹ It is unclear whether this means space should be unspecified (it could happen anywhere) or that the play should not have a location (it must not happen anywhere), but neither of them express any attachment to the local. In a less insistent way, plays as diverse as Sarah Kane's *Crave* (Paines Plough: Traverse Theatre, August 1998), Philip Ridley's *Tender Napalm* (Southwark Playhouse, April 2011) and Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris's *My Country* (National Theatre: Dorfman, February 2017) all seem to take place beyond space, to very differing effect.

A second form of placelessness is well articulated by the opening stage direction of Moira Buffini's *Dinner* (National Theatre: Loft, October 2002): "A table set for a lavish dinner, surrounded by darkness" (3). This kind of direction specifies the immediate location of the play, in this case a dinner table, but conspicuously casts the world beyond that into darkness. This is a long-running trope in postwar theatre: one might think of plays like Harold Pinter's *Old Times* (RSC: Aldwych, June 1971) or Philip Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* (Bush Theatre, January 1991), both of which textually populate the world inside the room where the play is set but structure in a level of mystery about the world beyond the door.

But this juxtaposition of specificity within and non-specificity is increasingly common. Dennis Kelly's *After the End* (Traverse Theatre, August 2005) is set in

a 1980s nuclear fallout shelter with a wheel-hatch in the ceiling, but in the present day. Bunks, table and chair, toilet area offstage and large metallic chest under the beds. (15)

Kindness (Royal Court Upstairs, May 2005), Simon Stephens's *Pornography* (Schauspielhannover, June 2005), Chris Thorpe's *There Has Possibly Been an Incident* (St Stephen's, Edinburgh, August 2013), Nick Payne's *Incognito* (Hightide Festival, April 2014), Alice Birch's *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (RSC, June 2014), Stef Smith's *Human Animals* (Royal Court Upstairs, May 2016) and several plays by Simon Stephens, Debbie Tucker Green and Caryl Churchill.

⁹ Crimp has used this more than once in his work. It is also the instruction at the beginning of each of the three plays that comprise *Fewer Emergencies* (Royal Court Upstairs, September 2005).

The same author's *Orphans* (Traverse Theatre, July 2009) is simply indicated as taking place in "HELEN and DANNY's flat" (17). In both plays, much of the action of the play relies on the blankness of the outside world and a key character's unreliable description of what might be beyond the hatch and the front door. In Martin Crimp's *In the Republic of Happiness* (Royal Court, December 2012), the first scene is set in an apparently conventional way to indicate a family gathering at Christmas:

Daylight. Christmas.
A small artificial tree with lights.
The family is gathered [...] (277)

It might even seem like the beginning of an Ayckbourn play, until the relationship between the room and a real outside world is compromised by the sudden unexplained entrance of Uncle Bob "from the background where he has silently appeared" (287), a direction that seems deliberately not to articulate his entrance in relation to the spatial rules of this diegetic world. (In Dominic Cooke's Royal Court production, through a mixture of scenographic trickery and misdirection, he seemed to have walked through a solid wall.)

A different kind of 'orphaned' space may be seen in Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* where the place is given as "Sally's backyard" (4), an apparent specificity, but the proper name – given how little we ever know about "Sally"¹⁰ – is a kind of false particularity, leaving the backyard generic (this was emphasized in Miriam Buether's design for the Royal Court production, the garden being both fully realized and stripped of anything particular, seeming to signify just 'garden'). It's an unspecific spatial specificity, surrounded by nothing, a structure that can also be seen in Mark Ravenhill's *The Cut* (Donmar Warehouse, February 2006): "A room. A desk" (183), Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door* (Royal Court Upstairs, September 2014): "TRAIN STATION" (3), "LIVING ROOM" (5), etc., Alice Birch's *Anatomy of a Suicide* (Royal Court Theatre, 2017): "A hospital corridor," "A kitchen" (9), etc. and Zinnie Harris's *Meet Me at Dawn* (Traverse Theatre, August 2017): "This play is set on a beach" (7). All of these directions involve a pseudo-specificity that is not really specific at all.¹¹

¹⁰ This is perhaps even clearer (or perhaps more clearly unclear) in Churchill's *A Number* (Royal Court Theatre, September 2002) in which we are told "The scene is the same throughout, it's where Salter lives" (164).

¹¹ I should mention the counter-example of Gary Owen's *Violence and Son* (Royal Court Upstairs, June 2015), which is set in "A living room in a flat above a convenience store. Beyond, a small Valleys town. Beyond that, all of Time and Space" (313). The final direction is probably indirect free style, channeling the protagonist's love for *Doctor Who* but oddly, by locating the action in the great vastness, it seems to crush the specificity of location.

Several playwrights are drawn to locations that are themselves what sociologist Marc Augé has called “Non-Places.”¹² These are generic locations produced by global capitalism from which local specificity has been marginalized or erased altogether, such as hotels, stations, coffee bars, airports, hospitals. David Greig, Polly Stenham, Mike Bartlett, John Donnelly, Kevin Elyot, Enda Walsh and Caryl Churchill have all written plays set in hotels; airports have provided locations for plays by Greig, David Edgar, Bryony Lavery, David Harrower and Timberlake Wertenbaker. These locations are obviously not unique to the contemporary period – Noel Coward’s most famous play begins in a hotel – but there is an intensity in the use of these non-places in the last two decades. They are locations whose anonymity means that identity loses its anchors in a broader reality, opening them up to liminality and transformation. Thrillers like Polly Stenham’s *Hotel* (National Theatre: Shed, May 2014) or Mike Bartlett’s *Wild* (Hampstead Theatre, June 2016) gain considerable narrative energy from their non-locational locations.

In other plays, this non-specificity is broader and more purposeful. David Greig’s *The American Pilot* (RSC: The Other Place, April 2005) is set “a small farm high up in a rural valley, in a country that has been mired in civil war and conflict for many years” (345), which picks out a category of location, but not a location. Zinnie Harris’s *How to Hold Your Breath* (Royal Court Theatre, February 2015), gives as a location “Europe” (13), which is both specific and unspecific, as is Jim Cartwright’s *Raz* (Assembly George Square, Edinburgh, August 2015) set in “A Northern town” (2). These directions suggest a pulling of focus to denote ways of seeing space beyond the local in favour of either regional transnational entities (“Europe”) or to see correspondences in the experience of nationhood: we might come to think of *The American Pilot* as set in Afghanistan, but the spatial abstraction allows us to connect a particular experience with a commonality of broader experiences in other places and times.

This attempt to generalize the experiences of place has particular force in a play like *Stoning Mary* by Debbie Tucker Green (Royal Court Theatre, April, 2005), which, Green tells us, is “set in the country it’s performed in” (2). This acknowledges that the circuit of new play production of which the Royal Court is a part is largely confined to the global North, because the dilemmas that structure the play – a couple deciding which of them will use a single supply of AIDS medication, the return of a child soldier to a family, a woman facing death by public stoning – are more characteristic of the global South (Africa and the Middle East particularly). The location of the play overlays one region of the world on another,

¹² See my essay (2003) on Augé’s ideas and their applicability in particular to David Greig’s work with *Suspect Culture*.

creating a spatial undecidability with powerful political resonance. Relatedly, Nick Gill's *Mirror Teeth* (Finborough Theatre, July 2011) begins in a family home in a western nation (given only as "Our Country" [23]), but in the second act, though we are still in the same family home, we are now in the Middle East. The impossible overlay of place on place forms the structural basis for an absurdist satire on the global arms trade.

Similar dramaturgical choices shape Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (Royal Court Upstairs, November 2001) and Mark Ravenhill's *Over There* (Royal Court Theatre, March 2009), whose titles advert to the plays' deliberate confounding of the political and ethical relationship between *here* and *there*, *near* and *far*, asking in part about the security of our own cultural values and our responsibility to the geographical other.¹³ One might also think of Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes* (National Theatre: Olivier, June 2010), which undecidably combines the tropes of classical Greek drama with the setting of a contemporary African country, emerging from a long period of civil war, the two periods juddering against each other, and creating a sustained reflection on the undercurrents of western civilization.

While those plays overlay two distinct locations in a single space, several recent plays mark place as textually moveable. Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* (Studio Theatre, Washington DC, September 2011) declares: "The play should be set in the city it's being performed in. Any references in the text that suggest another place should be amended" (137), which delegates the job of localization to the production, at arm's length from the play. The same is true of Stef Smith's *Human Animals*, which specifies that "If happening outside of London [...] references should be changed to similar references that suit the location where the performance is happening." Smith's play also notes that, "Where entirely necessary the performers may change words to suit their dialect" (5). This is echoed in other plays like Lucy Prebble's *The Effect* (National Theatre: Cottesloe, November 2012), which says "the performers should feel free to mould the text around themselves" (n.pag.) and *Ross and Rachel* by James Fritz (Assembly George Square Theatre, The Box, Edinburgh, August 2015), which directs that "The performer should use

¹³ This is not always so politically pertinent. Andrew Sheridan in *Winterlong* (Royal Exchange Theatre, February 2011) is more and less specifically non-specific: "The play takes place in and around Manchester, though this isn't strictly important. [...] It could take place anywhere and in any time" (4). This generality strikes an even more hubristic note in Fin Kennedy's *The Unravelling* (The Space UK, Edinburgh, August 2009), which claims to be "a story which transcends any culturally specific context and could be set in any city, anywhere in the world" (84). These are fine pieces of writing, but I wonder whether these directions might less represent the fundamental quality of fable that the writers are aiming for and more simply an evasion of history and politics.

their own accent” (4). Meanwhile both Simon Stephens’s *Morning* (Lyric Company: Traverse Theatre, August 2012) and Stuart Slade’s *BU21* (Theatre503, March 2016) direct that the actors names should replace the characters’ names in each production.

Other plays take pains to insist on scenographic non-place. *Motortown* (Royal Court Theatre, April 2006), Simon Stephens tells us, “should be performed as far as possible without décor” (142) and of *Birdland* (Royal Court Theatre, April 2014) he says, “The stage should be spare and abstract rather than mimetic or naturalistic” (4). Mark Ravenhill’s *Totally Over You* (Connections Festival, National Theatre, July 2003) explains, “The scenes are not set anywhere and need no scenery or furniture – nothing to suggest a location” (107). In Alice Birch’s *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*, “There shouldn’t be any set” (45). Brad Birch specifies that the “Setting and sound” of his play *The Brink* (Orange Tree Theatre, April 2016) should be “Transient, non-naturalistic. Uniform and efficient like a textbook” (2). My own play, *Chekhov in Hell* (Drum Theatre, Plymouth, November 2010) asks gnominically for “A design but no set” (23).

There are some key plays that have exerted a strong influence on British dramaturgy in the twenty-first century, and, in respect of these manipulations of non-place, few can be more influential than Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (Royal Court Upstairs, January 1995); it overlays Leeds and somewhere like Srebrenica on the same location; its setting is that classic non-place, a hotel room, but with the additional slippage that it is “the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world” (3); it exploits its own ambiguities about what is outside the room, both outside the door and then outside the building. In some productions (for example, Thomas Ostermeier’s production for the Schaubühne, March 2005, or Sean Holmes’s for the Lyric, Hammersmith, October 2010), after the “blast” of the title, the set is dismantled and the action of the play now takes place in some kind of blank space, beyond location. In Graeae’s touring production which opened in March 2006, the action on stage was interpreted by BSL signers on video and projected on the walls of the set; but these interpreters often had props that were absent on stage, doubling and displacing the action – where was the ‘real’ representation? On stage or screen? In the present or in the past? Live or recorded?

Overall, the picture here is of sustained, multiple dramaturgical displacement. Place is variously estranged, unspecified, annulled, orphaned, globalized, generalized, combined, relativized and scenographically anonymized. The question to consider then is whether this strong tendency in British playwriting, in Goodhart’s terms, expresses an Anywhere ideology that itself expresses the interests of global capital.

The globalization trilemma

To help think through the limitations of that analysis, I want to consider the argument of Dani Rodrik, a highly influential theorist of the global economy. Across a series of articles and books over the last two decades, Rodrik has formulated what he calls the “globalization trilemma” (*Globalization* Ch. 9). This argues that the three fundamental constituent elements of the global economic order are nation-states, globalization (in the sense of global economic integration) and democratic politics. The trilemma comes about, according to Rodrik, because you can only ever have two of these entities fully functioning at any one time.

According to Rodrik, you can only ever have two of these entities fully functioning at any one time. If you retain nations and democracy, that will limit globalization; as it happens, that is the arrangement that dominated the world from the Second World War to the mid-1970s, the so-called Bretton Woods system, named after the group of institutions that regulated the global economy, maintaining fixed exchange rates, tariffs on trade, etc., thus slowing the speed of economic integration. If you retain nations and global economic integration, however, that will tend to diminish democracy, as when the exchange markets act against the policies of democratically-elected governments (for example, France in the early eighties, the UK in 1992, the Asian Tigers in 1996, Brazil and Argentina in the late 1990s and more); this privileging of nation-states and globalization over democracy is the system we have lived with in the world since the late 1970s, the so-called Washington Consensus. And finally, he argues, if you retain global economic integration and democracy, that will inevitably tend to diminish the nation-state, a system which might be called “global cosmopolitan governance;” this is a system that has yet to be tried, but if it has been modelled anywhere, one might suggest that it has been modelled by the European Union.

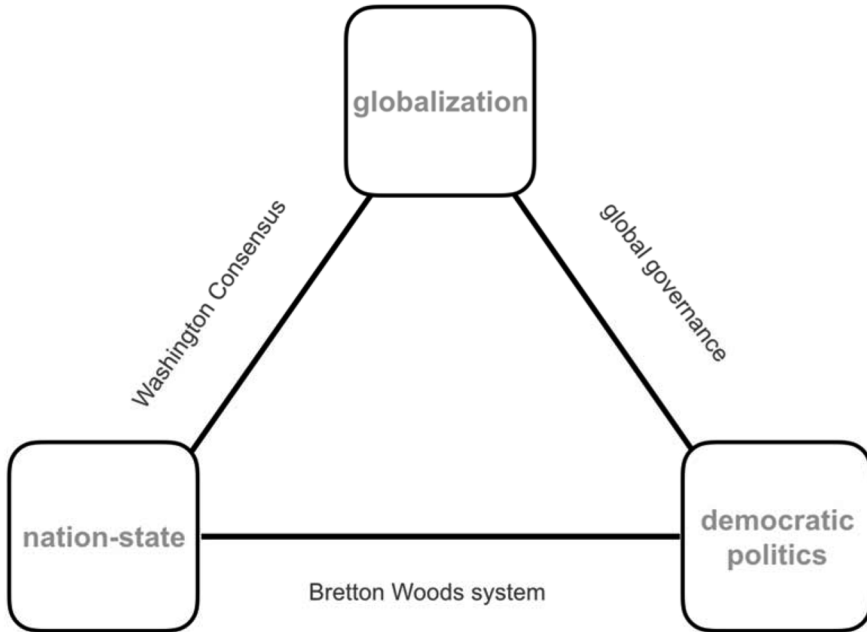


Fig. 4: The Globalization Trilemma; Source: adapted from Rodrik, *Globalization* 2011

Rodrik's model has much to recommend it. It seems to explain the dynamics of the two main geopolitical systems of the last 70 years and the stresses and strains within and between them. Rodrik is strong and clear at pointing out the way that globalization has undermined national democracy (*Globalization* 187–200). He offers a challenge to those (like me [2008]) who have argued for cosmopolitanism as a corrective to neoliberal globalization. It perhaps clarifies what is at stake in that position; if we consider democracy to be a necessary component of any world system worth wanting, we are left with a choice between nationhood or economic integration. The current right-wing position (or UKIP, Trump and others) chooses nationhood and democracy ('taking back control,' strong borders, an end to supranational EU regulation) over the forces of what they often call "globalism" (Tharoor). The cosmopolitan position would seem to choose global economic integration as the means of achieving cosmopolitan ethical integration at the expense of nationhood. And this might seem to support the Goodhart view that the Anywheres, for all our professed liberalism, have thrown in our lot with global capitalism to the neglect of a rightful sense of place and rootedness, the value of fine-grained local governance and the ingrained traditions and habits of national cultures.

Rodrik himself has changed his position on the most desirable resolution of the trilemma. In one of his earliest essays on the subject, "How Far Will Interna-

tional Economic Integration Go?” (2000), he judges “global governance” the preferable side of the triangle. By the time of his book, *The Globalization Paradox* (2011), he instead argues for a revival of the Bretton Woods arrangements. This may be a symptom of a deeper indeterminacy in the model.

Indeed, the three terms of the trilemma are perhaps not as clear as they first seem. ‘Globalization’ conflates purely economic forces with those cosmopolitan forces (greater understanding of other traditions, a widening circle of ethical responsibility, sharing of world cultures, etc.) that may not be wholly or partly dependent on economic integration. Rodrik’s model suggests that they all come as a single indivisible package even though, as when activists organize internationally to campaign against companies offshoring jobs to sweatshops in Asia or the tax avoidance schemes of global corporations, these forces can clash fundamentally with one another.

Second, what does he mean by “democratic politics”? The problem with this model is that by separating “democratic politics” from “nation-state,” it is hard to know what democracy can effectively mean. What is democracy without some sort of political apparatus (at whatever level) through which the democratic will can be enacted? In other words, in a topological anomaly, the second corner of the globalization triangle seems to overlap with the third. If it is meaningfully to be democracy, *dēmos* needs some *kratia*.

And third, Rodrik is inconsistent in how he characterizes the final term of the trilemma; in the schematic, he calls it the “nation state,” but in the subtitle of his book he refers just to “states;” elsewhere he refers casually to “nations” (*Globalization* 242), and sometimes he calls them “countries” (*Globalization* 240). But these are not all the same thing. The meaning of these things are contested, but broadly ‘nations’ are usually thought of as entities with history, culture and traditions, whether that is embodied in our languages and practices or existing in our collective imaginations (Anderson); ‘states’ are political and legal entities with specific jurisdiction over particular peoples; the ‘nation-state’ is an alliance between the two.

And this alliance is historically and geographically variable; there have been nations without states (for example, Israel before 1948, Palestine before 1994) and states with multiple nations (for example, the United Kingdom). The system of nations is generally thought to have originated with the Peace of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years War. As Adam Watson summarizes it, “The frontiers separating the states of these sovereigns were clearly drawn, with a thick line; and what happened inside that line was for the government of the state alone to determine” (188). This is the moment where the principle of national sovereignty enters international law. But even this moment, the apotheosis of the national boundary, contains the seeds of those boundaries’ demise. First, by enshrining

sovereignty in international law, it establishes the concept of the nation as a supranational principle to which nations are themselves subject. As John Gerard Ruggie shows (164–65) the principle is riven with contradiction, as when to maintain the inviolable sovereignty of a nation's territory within its borders, all nations are required to cede portions of their internal territory to other nations to house their embassies.

There is, in the historical assertion of nation, a persistent deconstructive energy that, in the very closing down of territory into nation, opens up spaces beyond nation. The history of the word 'international' illustrates this well. The word is coined in 1789 by Jeremy Bentham in his *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* where he uses it to pick out law that pertains to dispute between people of different nations (hence, inter-national law). In doing so, he insists that international means only "the mutual transactions between sovereigns as such" (296) and not some new class of supranational jurisprudence. In a footnote on the same page he hopes that the new term will be considered "sufficiently analogous and intelligible" as to replace what he considers the ambiguous former term "law of nations" which, he notes, "would seem rather to refer to internal jurisprudence" (296n). In doing so, he is noting that the meaning of the earlier term has seemed to transgress its linguistic borders and assume a larger, transnational significance. The same, of course, has happened to the word 'international' which no longer merely means relations between sovereign nations but a realm of transnational phenomena (security, terrorism, environmental hazard, finance and so on) that are specifically unrespecting of boundaries. (One might add that in the second edition of *Principles and Morals* in 1823, Bentham notes with satisfaction that the word has taken root, but largely due to the work of Étienne Dumont, his translator. Bentham was a rather tortuous writer in English and, in translating his work into French, Dumont reordered, cut and clarified many passages, giving him a wider readership in France than in Britain, the influence of which was then felt back in Britain. The success of 'international' was itself international, Bentham's linguistic sovereignty assured by Dumont's ambassadorial presence within Bentham's textual boundaries.)

This paradoxical movement in the idea of nation is pursued by Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community* (1986), which argues that even the most communitarian forms of political thought have failed to free themselves from the spectre of individualism. A fully radical conception of community would disperse all singularities, indeed, he says, is already there in the notion of singularity. What he says seems to resonate with sovereignty, nation and the Westphalian border:

A simple and redoubtable logic will always imply that within its very separation the absolutely separate encloses, if we can say this, more than what is simply separated. Which is to say that the separation itself must be enclosed, that the closure must not only close around territory (while still remaining exposed, at its outer edge, to another territory, with which it thereby communicates), but also, in order to complete the absoluteness of its separation, around the enclosure itself (4).

Absolute national sovereignty, of the kind UKIP fantasizes about, is internally dependent on its outside, opening the inside to the outside and undoing the very possibility of sovereignty. Nancy's radical re-conception of community is of perpetual movement and openness than can never be closed: "Incompletion," he writes, "is its principle" (35).

There is, therefore, a continual movement embedded in the very formation of the nation-state that works to uncouple the two terms. The existence of nationhood generates the need for institutions of state at a greater level of international generality, which in turn can produce new experiences of regional, even transnational identity (as when an inhabitant of Harare can 'feel' African as much as Zimbabwean). At the same time, strong assertions of nationhood often produce counter-formations in the assertions of regional identity that become sources of national feeling in themselves and sometimes produce institutions of state at the local level (as when lingering cultural and political differences with English foster Scottish nationalist feeling which in turn leads to the founding of a Scottish Parliament). Nationhood and statehood are always on the move, expanding and contracting, rising and falling; we are mistaken if we think they do or should coincide.

This is where Rodrik's scheme begins to fall apart, because it assumes the stability of the nation-state. In fact, functions of the state might become part of political democracy. Nation, on the other hand, might uncouple from state and become just another kind of regional difference, important and lived and felt, but without the borders between these regions having any legal significance. And if nation were to recede in significance, so too would the meaning of 'globalization.' After all, without nations, 'global trade' just becomes 'trade.'

This also points to the real weakness of David Goodhart's analysis. His characterization, *Anywheres*, suggests a casual disregard for place that (as Theresa May suggests) easily collapses into a philosophy of *Nowhere*. This is a nihilistic anti-attachment which is quite different from the deconstructive, paradoxical movement that continually sees in nation a mechanism for moving beyond nation, that transforms places into other places.

Michel Foucault's 1967 lecture "Of Other Places" is the origin of the term "heterotopia" which has been recently very fruitful in thinking about theatre. Foucault defines "heterotopia" as a by-product of the spatial organization of

society, a place where things that don't quite fit, that operate according to a rival spatial logic, are placed. He talks about spaces like prisons, asylums and cemeteries as heterotopias, but also, because of its capability of "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (25), argues that the theatre too is a heterotopia.

Joanne Tompkins has expanded significantly on this cryptic hint to produce a sophisticated model of the varying ways in which the theatre articulates and deploys space. In most theatrical performances, she suggests, there are at least three kinds of space overlaid on one another. There is the theatre itself, a kind of heterotopia in which some of the usual utilitarianism of daily life is suspended in favour of a more oneiric experience; there is the scenography, the transformation of a relatively general space into something both particular and other, a space of work and imagination; and finally there is the imagined space of the performance's fictional world (29). These three spaces relate to one another – complementing, clashing, contesting – and out to the fourth space that is the world outside the theatre. Each of these has some kind of heterotopic potential, to interrupt our quotidian experiences of space with something strikingly different. For Tompkins, this heterotopic potentiality is replete with political possibility; framing and foregrounding the sociopolitical articulation of space (divisions, hierarchies, etc.) and contesting them.

This model allows us to understand how the dramaturgical patterns I have identified might best be understood in relation to debates about nationhood. Most of the plays that I have cited were produced within more-or-less conventional theatre buildings in major cities like London, Edinburgh or Manchester. They will all have had some kind of scenographic presentation, even if that is a fairly minimal organization of the space as in *Motortown*, for which the stage was stripped almost entirely bare with only plastic chairs and some small scenographic pieces brought on for particular scenes. There is, then, in the experience of these plays, as the audience moves from the street to the theatre's interior, to the experience of the stage, to the experience of the play's fictional world, a movement from place to space to something beyond space. This movement reflects the heterotopic movement lurking within all *topos*, the movement beyond nation initiated by nationhood.

These plays that take place within ambiguous, orphaned, annulled, unspecified, textually or scenographically blank spaces form part of a theatrical articulation of the movement beyond nation. These plays and productions *together*, require us to find an intersection between imagined space and imagined non-space, within real non-utilitarian spaces that we must in turn connect to the utilitarian space of our daily lives and of the political realities that surround us. Zinnie Harris's *How To Hold Your Breath* was a kind of anti-*Faust*, a play about a woman refusing a pact

with the devil, and being pursued across Europe until reaching Europe's edge where she joined desperate refugees as they made a disastrous journey across the sea. To watch this was to sit in London and imagine Europe, and then imagine beyond Europe, as, in the penultimate scene of Vicky Featherstone's exquisite production, a boatload of refugees, the human toll of that European border, of all borders, tumbled down over the stage to drown and drown again.

This post-spatial movement is as important politically as it is valuable theatrically. What we on the left must maintain – as Britain tumbles chaotically out of Europe into a delusional ersatz nationhood – is not an adherence to the European Union as such, but to the European Union an embodiment of this post-national tendency. Tompkins notes that heterotopia overlaps, but does not entirely identify with, the older concept of utopia. She cites Hetherington to observe that Thomas More, in coining the word, “collapsed two Greek words together: *eu-topia* meaning good place and *ou-topia* meaning no-place” (qtd. in Tompkins 25). It is tempting, in these polarized Brexiteering times, to fall for the error of countering rampant Europhobia with a Europhilia that would see the European Union as a EU-topia, but this would be a mistake. Like the nation, the European project contains the seeds of its own transcendence and must, at some point, go past its own exclusivity as a community. As such the European Community has the potential to become an inoperative community, in Jean-Luc Nancy's terms, and these plays perhaps are an attempt to stage a community without boundaries, without identity, a world of infinite democracy, a gesture towards a world between and beyond somewhere and anywhere.

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