# Brexit and belonging: what the concept of autochthony can tell us

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What does it mean to 'belong' in the world of Brexit? **Kathryn Cassidy** *(left) and* **Gill Davidson (Northumbria University)** *discuss how the concept of autochthony, or what it means to be indigenous or 'native', can illuminate the way we think about Brexit and belonging – and in particular the categories of 'Brexiter' and 'Remainer'.*
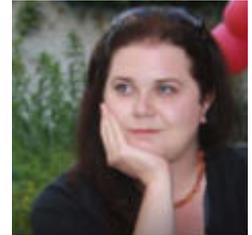
As our political scene descends into chaos over Brexit – whether the deal is passed or not, whether we leave or not – one of the lasting legacies of this period will be the questions relating to belonging (Gilmartin, Burke, & O'Callaghan, 2018) that it has raised. Brexit has not only given us shifting political affiliations, but has also been challenging us to reconsider how we feel about being inside or outside a community and a consensus (Anderson & Wilson, 2018). The question of who can claim to belong to British society seems to be central to so many of the discussions and debates surrounding Brexit, but almost all the focus has been on the belonging of EU citizens in the UK and the introduction of settled status – as well as conversely UK citizens living elsewhere in the EU.

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The contested politics of belonging emerging within the Brexit context, and the ways in which these political projects are being negotiated in everyday life, deserve urgent attention. Generations to come will contest the issue. But in order to do this effectively we need to change the conceptual vocabulary we use when we discuss Brexit-related belonging. One solution might be to pay greater attention to the concept of autochthony, after Peter Geschiere (2009) and Nira Yuval-Davis (2011). Despite being widely used in analysis of movements in Africa (Cueppens and Geschiere, 2005), autochthony has had little impact on public discourse surrounding Brexit.

The elasticity of the notion of autochthony – its claims to have been somewhere before someone else, to come from the soil – may provide a more useful basis to consider belonging in the context of Brexit than more widely known categorisations. Shifting and often vague understandings of who is 'autochthonous' inform the everyday politics of belonging under Brexit. They make it difficult to directly assign splits in opinion, such as between Brexiteers and Remainers, to well-known drivers of social inequality in the past. Better-known and seemingly fixed categories, such as 'race', 'citizenship', 'religion' and 'gender', do not fit the current challenge.

Meanwhile, Brexit is not only compelling us to change how we understand inclusion – by forcing us to decide who is a rightful, autochthonous member of society – but also to shift the scale of questions of belonging. It lays emphasis on defining larger groups and communities ('the' British society), implicitly making them more relevant than minorities or particular status groups. It provides a broader mode of inclusion/exclusion, seeking to shape the foundations of society, not its margins.

This broad understanding of autochthonous belonging decentralises well-established categories of social difference and inequality. But it also refers back to the everyday activities of drawing social boundaries and establishing a sense of inclusion or exclusion that informs community building, solidarity and respect of others. Careful analytical reconstruction of such everyday politics is necessary so we can grasp the role different social actors play, and identify the shifting lines of exclusion and inclusion that Brexit has produced, or at least revived.

The social sciences have only partially grasped the multidimensionality of Brexit, and in particular, the everyday impact of shifting the political framework from a de-bordered EU-bound perspective to a re-nationalised, UK-centred one. We propose a theoretical framework for approaching the issue of Brexit-related belonging, which focuses on 'autochthonous' groups of the population and the politics of belonging that addresses them. For us, three analytical subjects emerge: belonging through everyday rebordering and immigration control; belonging through political projects; and belonging through political and media discourses.

1) Belonging through everyday rebordering and immigration control

Who belongs to British society, and who does not? This is not a simple matter of citizenship, but relates to inclusion and culture. The Windrush scandal showed us how autochthonous 'belonging' can shift, as long-settled migrants to the UK were excluded by changes in immigration policy but then widely supported when the press seized upon the story. The differences are reinforced by what we see as our obligation to personally decide who or what is autochthonous, or compatible with an imagined 'home'. Who claims to have always 'been there'? Does the imagined British 'we' during and after Brexit include a different selection of people (with different features) than before? In which ways does it go beyond former ethnic or racial lines of demarcation?

Autochthonic politics of belonging are superior to other types of social exclusion because of their positive connotation. Who can oppose the objective of feeling at home? Supporters of extreme political projects can claim they are not 'racist' but merely against all those who 'do not belong'.

2) Belonging through political projects

The formal aspect of belonging with which we are most familiar is that of state citizenship. While dual citizenship is possible, current political discourse can view such belonging as exclusive – for example, in 2016 when Theresa May said, 'if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere'. Citizenship provides a frame for developing signifiers of belonging, e.g. individual and collective traits which stand for particular homogeneities (Yuval-Davis, 2011). By assembling more or less homogeneous subgroups under the umbrella of the nation state, diversity can be controlled.

By demanding that we all take an unequivocal stand as 'Brexiters' or 'Remainers', Brexit is a project of homogenisation. Forcing us to choose one or the other may obscure more complex individual feelings of belonging, as well as our beliefs about others. The dichotomous choice forced by Brexit makes different social positionings and the origins of inequality invisible – which may be politically desirable for those who seek to manage uncertainties and systemic destabilisation during a period of radical change.

3) Belonging through political and media discourses that reflect the British sense of otherness and distinction

In the context of Brexit, the national media have often given up their former role as independent commentators on political struggles, openly aligning themselves with what they frame as the 'right' cause. This practice is not new, but we have recently seen media polarisation deepen and become more pronounced. It can be found in the emphasis placed

on being British, being at home, or defending one's home against alien impact, alongside the rejection of anything representing the 'other' side – the EU, its regulations, and European heads of state – as harmful. This imaginary of 'us against the EU' has lain the foundations of what might be called 'autochthony as common sense': everybody who wants to be regarded as a reasonable citizen should know where his/her home is and where he/she belongs, regardless of whether he/she is a 'Brexiter' or 'Remainer'. The normative underpinning of otherwise existing political orientations, feelings, and imaginaries may support and legitimise processes of 'othering' that have already been hinted at in society. The feeling that one naturally belongs to the 'better' or 'legitimate' side of things may give more impetus to the repulsion of something identified as different or alien.

Brexit has given the everyday concept of autochthony new importance. It affects the very fabric of society, in that it demands dichotomous decisions *pro* or *con*, and assumes a commonality which can only partly be shared by many, has probably never existed before and cannot be achieved, except at the cost of complete social homogeneity or totalitarian rule.

Yet despite its basic inconsistency, the construct of autochthony is appealing for politics, the media, social majorities and minorities alike. For those in power it promises to unite a deeply unsettled and fragmented society, and takes our focus away from social inequality and intersectionality, if only temporarily. For the powerless, it promises to create a pathway to inclusion that had formerly been barred by ethnic, racial, gender-related and other traits. However, autochthony is problematic because of its fuzziness: the criteria of in/exclusion are arbitrary, and 'belonging' may mean different things to different people, which could potentially create new dividing lines between social groups and individuals based on othering and rebordering.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. A fuller discussion of the issues can be found in Cassidy, K, Innocenti, P and Bürkner, H J (2018) <u>Brexit and new autochthonic politics of belonging</u>*, Space and Polity, DOI: 10.1080/13562576.2018.1505490*

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Kathryn Cassidy is Associate Professor in Human Geography at Northumbria University.

Gill Davidson is a Research Associate at Northumbria University.