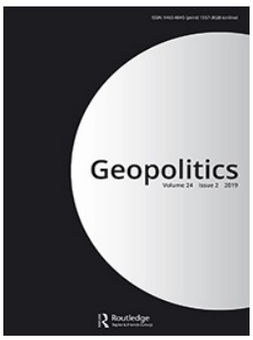

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City-State Britain: A Counter-Narrative to 'Brexit'

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ABSTRACT

The incipient crisis of the British state, which seems so apparent in 'Brexit', the move towards Scottish Independence, and the succession of minority governments, ought to be understood as a historical *conjuncture*. This conjuncture has entailed a profound reconfiguration of the social relations that constitute the British state-territory in the context of the world-system, making of it something as geographical as it is historical. Understanding this reconfiguration in novel, innovative, critical, productive or even sublative ways seems therefore to be a priority in the study of post-Brexit British politics and global political economy. Furthermore, as 'Brexit' has become the dominant narrativization of the objective conditions and subjective perceptions of this crisis, a convincing counter-narrative must be conceived for critical thinking and praxis. In the struggle over how to define our crisis in the British state, and drawing upon Critical Urban Theory, World-System Analysis, and poststructuralist political thought, the paper introduces the concept of the *axiomatic city-state*. This concept offers not merely an alternative empirical characterisation of the reconfigured British state, but a means of conceptualising broader transformations across the world-system at large. More importantly, it suggests a politically potent means for exploring critical vocabularies, strategies, and perhaps organization into the near future.

Introduction

With British withdrawal from the European Union dominating the political discourse in recent years, with the Damoclean sword of Scottish secession hanging over our heads, with a decade of minority governments influencing our party political horizons, and now with the final act of the Austerity drama set to be played out through governmental reaction to the COVID phenomenon, we have doubtless come to yet another one of those coordinate historical and strategic points of conjuncture in the British state often referred to as a 'crisis'. Described variously as a Gramscian 'organic crisis' (Jessop 2017), a 'constitutional crisis' (Ringen 2018), or even as an 'existential crisis' in the very idea of Britain itself (Hassan 2018), how can this 'crisis' be approached in a way that provides both critical insight into it and an intellectual means of shaping what comes after?

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Perhaps the most trenchant navigation of this problem is offered in Colin Hay's exploration of the 'moment of state crisis' (1996). This is not merely a 'condition of rupture and breakdown', but also a 'moment of *decisive intervention*' (1996, 254). By this, Hay is writing of the way in which a crisis is constituted by the production of a hegemonic narrative of the conjuncture leading to a crisis on the part of analysts, commentators, activists, and protagonists. In this narrativization of crisis, the substantive failures of the system must be recruited into that narrative and rendered into its symptoms, thus subordinating (but not occluding) the importance of the 'objective conditions' in the crisis to 'how it is subjectively perceived and hence brought into existence through narrative and discourse'. In short, there is a struggle to '*identify, define and constitute* crisis' as a means of securing 'state power' (1996, 255). 'Brexit' is the successful narrativization of the contradictions and ruptures from which the current crisis of the British state is composed. The 'symptoms' that have become increasingly apparent in British society after thirty-odd years of Neoliberalization and ten years of Austerity have been successfully pinned on the EU in a sufficiently large number of British minds to make that narrative hegemonic (Bachmann and Moisio 2020, 260; Bachmann and Sidaway 2016; Hennig and Dorling 2016). The apparent trajectory of this narrative is a resurgent nationalism, predicated on a reaffirmation of Britain as a nation-state, so as to mobilise a freshly legitimated one-nation conservatism to protect and deepen the position of the oligarchy that now dominates it.

If we object to this narrative, and find its hegemony unhelpful according to some criteria, then the task ahead is to derive counternarratives that 'compete in terms of their ability to find resonance with individuals', but which also possess 'adequacy as explanations for the condition they diagnose' (Hay 1996, 255). So, in our prospective counternarrative, we have to contend both with the objective conditions of crisis and the subjective perceptions. My exploration of the city-state concept is a contribution towards just such a counternarrative in the context of the British state-territory.

In both the counternarrative to Brexit and the re-conceptualisation of the city-state around which that counternarrative is fashioned, I am engaging in the production of a 'grand regional narrative', something that Alex Murphy defines as a 'generalized, empirically grounded account of what is going on, or has been going on, in a region of sufficient size and importance to be widely viewed as a significant presence on the world stage' (2013, 132). Though clearly diminished from the heady days of formal empire, the British state-territory nevertheless seems to retain sufficient size and importance for one to write credibly of it in terms of a grand regional narrative. However, why would one want to?

As part of a grand regional narrative, the *City-State Britain* concept serves as one of Kevin Ward's 'representational strategies' that are generated sometimes

by the 'public intellectuals' of political geography (Ward 2007). Murphy and others have exhorted geographers not to shy away from this kind of commitment to 'public geographies' that 'focus attention on widening geography's impact on the political and intellectual life of the societies in which we are embedded' (Murphy 2006, 2; See also Moseley 2010; Massey 2008; Mitchell 2008; Staeheli and Mitchell 2008; Ward 2006, 2007; Fuller 2008). If these public geographies are to be taken up successfully, we cannot be constrained by the microscale of strictly empirical researches as a matter of disciplinary propriety, nor ought we to be limited automatically to the decorously reticent proportions common to deconstructive critique (see Taylor 1993, 181). Instead, we must feel at liberty when necessary to 'pose topically bigger questions and be willing to offer broader-scale ideas about how they might be addressed' (Murphy 2006, 6). In this case, the topically bigger question pertains to nothing less than the British state, with the broader-scale pertaining to the relation of that state to the world-system at large. The argument is that to engage in the production of this particular grant regional (counter) narrative is as defensible intellectually as it is necessary socially. However, regardless of how politically stimulating it might turn out to be, to attempt such a manoeuvre is not without its potential pitfalls, and these need to be adequately addressed at the outset.

The critical and open-spirited contrivance of a normative counternarrative is precisely what Murphy, Mike Kesby (2007), Katharyne Mitchell (2008), and others seem to desire as they prevail upon critical geographers to shape the contours of narratives in a manner more affirmative than by simply 'deconstructing particular facets of prevailing grand regional narratives and showing how or why they do not capture the full range of what is happening' (Murphy 2013, 136; Massey 2008, 144–145). Instead of eschewing a more affirmative stance for reasons of allergic disposition, epistemologically schooled geographers are encouraged to be bold at times in embracing normative commitments and horizons (Bachmann and Moisio 2020; Kesby 2007; Murphy 2006, 2013; Olson and Sayer 2009), alloyed of course with the reflexive 'poststructuralist perspectives' typical to more critically sensitive geography (Kesby 2007, 2814). To shy away from the more normative aspect of regional narratives, so it is argued, can be merely to cede the field to prevalent and unreflexively held grand narratives, such as in the case of Brexit, and so to lose those 'opportunities to shape public conversations and decisions' presented to us by the objective conditions of a crisis conjuncture (Murphy 2013, 143). Emphatically, to assume a normative voice, in order explicitly to position a particular statement, is not thereby to deny oneself the capacity or opportunity to qualify, bracket, or suspend any such statement when required.

The notion of grand regional narrative stands in studied contrast to the more epistemologically questionable 'metanarrative', that is to say a 'universal,

comprehensive explanation of historical experience and present circumstance that shapes thinking in fundamental (and often unexamined) ways' (Murphy 2013, 132). Arguably, this latter is what we encounter in the Brexit narrative. I would therefore not claim any 'authoritative or all-encompassing character' for whatever grand regional narrative I might produce, but instead offer 'contextual, provisional, normative and general constructs and not innate or natural entities' (Kellner 2013, 171). Suitably forearmed and forewarned, I suspect that political geographers today are more than capable of handling adroitly and effectively those 'influential mesoscale empirically grounded narratives about regions … that shape ideas and actions', whilst nevertheless retaining an informed and literate vigilance against the coordinating and mystifying unities of metanarrative (2013, 134).

The exigency is to navigate critically and productively between the positive and the negative, the normative and the deconstructive, the objective and the subjective (Murphy 2006, 7–8), and in this way to communicate counter-narratives appropriately to the further public. Though it might require some 'adjustment in dominant scholarly norms' for certain social sciences (Murphy 2013, 143), that fact is all the more reason to attempt and refine this kind of political geography and move the discourse in more productive and engaging directions. Caveats aside, let us move on to the substance.

A Counter-Narrative to 'Brexit'

What are the problems with the Brexit metanarrative, and what is the basis for exploring alternative narrativizations? The narrative has little place for developments inside the state-territory, and projects the objective conditions of the crisis of the British state onto external objects: principally, the EU and Britain's membership of it (Agnew 2020). Stagnating real wages (Harvey, 2005, 2010; Foster and Magdoff, 2009), a long-term strategic 'rent offensive' (Lefebvre 1970, 212; Hudson 2012; Smith 2007; Welsh, 2020a; 2020b), an enlargement of the reserve army of labour (Grover 2003, 2019), financialisation of the state (Fine 2012; Henderson and Ying Ho 2014; Lapavitsas, 2009; Shaxson, 2019), massive privatizations (Christophers 2018; Meek, 2014; Shaxson, 2012), the abrogation of industrial policy (Alford 1995; Chang 2012; Crafts 2018; Mason 2019; Newton and Porter 1988), all have characterised Britain's political economy for decades now. They are all features of a chronic accumulation crisis in the core states of the world-system and the anti-democratic political response to it in the British state on the part of dominant elites (Welsh, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Whilst the symptoms of this political economy are integrated into the Brexit narrative – massive importation of foreign workers (immigration), social disintegration, declining living standards (Agnew 2020; Goodwin and Milazzo 2017) – what is never considered in that metanarrative is how these 'symptoms' might be strategically irrelevant to the institutions of

European Union (of which most detractors are entirely ignorant). These symptoms are not narrativized in terms of the domestic governing strategy of a metropolitan elite that has been responding to chronic accumulation crisis for decades now in a manner deleterious to the development, prosperity, and wellbeing of a provincial citizenry to which it seems increasingly indifferent. It is theparticular qualities, structure, and iterative theme of this asymmetry that seem not to be adequately grasped in the prevailing Brexit narrative and its Westphalian predication upon the nation-state formation.

Significantly, Britain has remained outside of the Eurozone, and has thus evaded most of the problematic effects of that increasingly distrusted and maligned institutional architecture (See Lapavitsas, 2012; Varoufakis 2018). One is left with the suspicion that the disaffections, disenfranchisements, and dissatisfactions that inform much of the anti-EU discourses around the Brexit narrative arise rather from objective strategic transformations taking place within the British state, and which have been realised through the 'internal' reconfiguration of the strategic social relations that constitute it (O'Rourke, 2019; Meek, 2014).

For example, in the case of immigration, it was less the accession *per se* of the former Soviet Satellites (A8) in 2004 and 2007 that precipitated large-scale immigration of migrant workers, as it was the strategic decision by the Blair government to opt-out of the 'transition controls' that were available to moderate and graduate the migrant worker movements over a longer period of time (see Thompson 2017). This stood in contrast to the decisions of other EU states, such as Germany, who did implement them (Watt and Wintour, 2015). The nature of the subsequent immigration cannot therefore primarily be placed at the door of the European Union and its architecture (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017), but was rather the result of a domestic political preference to secure access to cheap service labour, satisfy ideological proclivities, and to further conditions of anti-inflationary wage repression across the British state-territory (Thompson 2017, 438). Immigration is therefore less a matter of EU as it is the social, economic, and political agenda of dominant domestic elites, on the one hand, and the absence of an adequate institutional architecture for the capitalist world-system as a whole to handle these forces, on the other.

In another ironic example of how EU institutions cannot be scapegoated for the exposure of the UK population to Capital's predations, EU membership has acted to insulate and protect UK taxpayers from the City of London in the face of domestic political impotence on the part of the UK Government (Schelke 2016). This protection has particularly been provided against major hedge fund managers in the City of London, who have been hitherto subject to post-2008 EU regulation, and who have subsequently become significant Brexit supporters.

To the extent that 'external' forces have played a significant role in the reconfigurations of the British state, they are of international and pan-global

provenance, rather than simply of EU institutional origin (Varoufakis 2015). In the retreat from empire and industry (Alford 1995), British elites have found a new expression of the relationship between the British state-territory and the world-system, and that expression I argue is the financialised city-state (Welsh, 2017,, 2019; See also Ertürk et al, 2011). It is in relation to this expression, and the transformations both constructive of it and consequent to it, that the objective conditions for the crisis of the British state can perhaps be more felicitously understood and strategically narrativized in a way that more effectively critiques those cadres responsible for it.

Given that crisis entails a contradiction, and contradictions require time to become crises, a historical view of the current crisis in the British state is a necessity (Koselleck, 1988, 127; Hay 1996). However, our view of this crisis must bring the temporal into relation with the pressing spatialities of the British state expressed in its changing post-industrial political geography. In order to understand this crisis more comprehensively, as well as in its constitutive elements mentioned above, we must therefore examine the recent history of the British state-territory. There we shall find at least some conception of the trajectory that has brought us to this crisis, and therefore also some answers to that most political of questions: what is to be done?

The counternarrative to Brexit in our present conjuncture goes something like this. As a strategic response to the accumulation contradictions of the post-war decades, neoliberalisation emerged as government policy in the late 1970s spearheaded by deindustrialisation and financialisation (Gamble, 2001; Glyn, 2006; Harvey, 2005 ; Welsh, 2020d). Appropriate to a financialised idiom of post-industrial political economy, surplus formation became predicated decisively less upon the accumulation of profit from production processes, and more from interest and rent-seeking activities arising from privatisation of property which ranged from share-holding to real-estate acquisition (Foster and Magdoff, 2009). With wages kept down, and general profit rates still problematic (Bakir and Campbell 2009, 2010, 2013), the result has been a rent-offensive within the British state, and one which has become a caricature of the generalised rent-offensive across the core states of a neoliberal world-system that has proven increasingly incapable of restoring sufficient accumulation for its crisis-free reproduction (Harvey 2003, 2010, 2015; Moore, 2015; Duménil and Lévy 2004, 2011; Varoufakis 2015; Welsh, 2020c). Though it is a world-systemic phenomenon of historical capitalism, this rent-offensive has been particularly acute in the British context because of the paucity of accumulation alternatives congenial to a dominant class reliant upon strategic financialization (Newton and Porter 1988). Commensurate with this, the realisation of surpluses became increasingly concentrated over successive decades from the state-territory as a whole into the metropolitan assemblage, which is unsurprising given the tendency for FIRE industries and 'producer services' to gravitate into metropoles (Sassen 2001). Consequently, the political struggle

over that surplus has concentrated into London. The outcome is a metropolitan assemblage, whose strategic positionalities of surplus realisation have become captured by a transnational class of financiers, buttressed by the emergence of a dominant liberal ideology of the city (See Brenner 2016; Welsh, 2017), and which has in turn been expressed through secondary organs in the media and culture industries. Regardless of the greater fluidity and interchangeability of personnel within this trans-global 'econocracy' (Davis 2017), the concentrated positionalities of command, capture, and appropriation endure. It is little wonder, from issues ranging from immigration policy through transport policy to constitutional reform, that the prevailing impression in the political community is a state captured and directed not in the interests of that political community, but of the metropolitan elites and their various agents across the state-territory. However, what is of signal importance is how the Brexit narrative has redirected this sentiment onto the EU political entity, and shifted responsibility for the symptoms of neo-liberalization onto a small internationalist left-liberal fraction of the metropolitan elite associated with it.

In this article, I shall introduce the concept of the *axiomatic city-state* as a critical means of narrativizing the changing political geography of Britain today (See also Welsh, 2019). This concept will allow us to develop the suspicion that the preponderance of such a global city as London within the post-imperial rump of the British state-territory is something of immense and strategic political importance (See Henderson and Ying Ho 2014). More than that, this preponderance seems somehow to be instrumental in the emergence of the crisis in the state-territory, and it will become more apparent when we consider the effect of the city-state formation upon axioms of development, investment, growth, surplus recycling, social identification, and political participation.

This notion of 'axioms' is very important, as we shall see below. Suffice it to say at this point that the relatively novel notion of the *axiomatic* city-state offers a conceptualisation that is pertinent not to the conventional and formal proportions of the city-state familiar from either our medieval or early-modern history books (See Blockmans 1994; Chittolini 1994; Griffeth 1981; Waley 1988), for 'London is clearly not a city-state in any straightforward sense. The city's customs, constitution and citizenship have not been formal, foundational elements in the present-day English state of which it is part' (Keene 2004, 466). Instead, the concept must be placed in the context of 'late', 'advanced', or perhaps even 'postmodern', capitalism (Braidotti 2013; Jameson 1992; Mandel 1999; Negri 2018). It must be positioned as a concept capable analytically of opening up the 'social factory' that is more characteristic of our 21st century mode of production (Negri 1992; Tronti 1973). This way it can contribute to a relevant, stimulating, and protean political critique of post-Fordist regimes of political economy.

Doubtless a highly theoretical and somewhat obscure-sounding proposition, I claim that the concept nevertheless does have empirical utility for future analysis that wishes to be as much political as it is social-scientific. The presentation below will perhaps sound dubious to some, but if the reader will step outside of the conventional tableau of the city-state, and instead enter into the initially abstract spirit of the axiomatic, its utility for *material* analysis of British politics will become apparent. At this stage, I can only ask that the reader suspend their preconceptions for the moment and adopt a sympathetic stance towards the primary objective here: to consider an alternative way of thinking about the British state generally, and of narrativizing 'Brexit' particularly, that provides for a critical analysis of the social relations of power and domination that are now characteristic in that state.

Why concern oneself with the city-state concept, given that there are numerous other conceptualisations of British politics that are easier to communicate and more likely to be accepted. Why make life hard for oneself? Quite simply, the city-state concept has valence as a heuristic device (Glassner 2004, 3, 6; Keene 2004); a quality that flows from its historical familiarity both inside and outside the academy. Whilst emphatically moving away from the formal historical contours of this political formation, I do want to mobilize its social, cultural, and even geographical familiarity. As will be expanded upon below, this is for the reason that the concept is not merely a social scientific model, but a conceptual political 'weapon' to be 'turned against the heavy arms of the state' (See Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 329). It must therefore be familiar enough, and succinct enough, to be generally graspable for successful insertion into mainstream political discourses, which by no means entails any necessary sacrifice of intellectual integrity or scientific validity (Mitchell 2008, 3; Murphy 2013, 143).

To begin to explore whether or not the concept has validity or plausibility for research into contemporary British politics, it is necessary to bring in a number of theoretical concerns touching upon 'axiomatics' and urban theory, so as to contextualise the concept in broader academic discourses, to connect those discourses to our object of analysis (the British state), to reassure the sceptical reader, and ultimately to facilitate understanding of the intellectual intricacies involved for those who are relatively unfamiliar with more recent developments in critical political theory.

A Regulative Idea for Politics?

The conventional social scientific question that is usually asked of a concept pertains to validity. In this case, we would ask to what extent does the concept of the city-state succinctly capture the essence of how the British state has been reformed and reconfigured over recent decades? Is this a convincing portrait

of how social relations are constellated in the British state? However, to ask this question politically should take us beyond the empirical concern, for it is also a *political* question.

Though I shall indicate further down some provisional *axioms* of the city-state (see Table 1), it is not my intention to 'prove' or 'demonstrate' the veracity of the claim, as though it were possible to show conclusively how social reality conforms to the 'model' of the city-state concept. Working from the Foucauldian dictum that knowledge is an *effect* of power, rather than its predicate, the objective here is rather to arrive at a form of knowledge appropriate for our objective to govern and be governed in a particular way (See Foucault 2013, 227). What this means is that the utility of the city-state concept lies in its prospective capacity to shape political discourse, rather than report upon it. As a regulative idea, such a concept ought to be treated as a 'model of realisation' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 528), rather than a model of representation, and as a conceptual contribution to new metaphors that 'don't just reflect changing realities', but actually 'create shifts in the narrative' (Buck 2013). Basically, axioms allow us to generate undecidable propositions, which cannot yet be proved or disproved, but open up the possibility for realising different futures.

Table 1. Axioms of the city-state.

Ideology	Political Economy
Romantic Cosmopolitanism.	Strategic 'Rent Offensive'.
Lionising of the Mercurial Entrepreneur.	Metropolitan Pole of Accumulation.
Civic Chauvinism and Acute Anti-Nationalism.	Government Prioritizes Financial Industries.
Institutionalisation of *Laissez-Faire* Doctrines.	Economic Domination of FIRE Industries.
Grand Rhetoric of Speed, Flow, Transience.	Predominance of Fictitious Capital.
Anti-Productivism/Anti-Labourism.	Strategic Aversion to Capital Controls.
Valorisation of Capitalist Roles.	Local Accumulation by Dispossession.
Normative/Doctrinaire Multiculturalism.	Anti-Developmentalist Rent-Seeking.
Trickle-Down Economics.	Import Oriented Economy.
Culture/Education	**Geopolitics**
Civic Boosterism.	Inter-City Rivalry.
Vilification of Parochial Mores.	'Soft Power' Techniques.
Growing Export Market for Cultural Commodities.	Power Projected Through Financial Instruments.
Public Growth of Private Spectacle.	Dependence on Superpower Patronage.
Educational Outcomes Directed into Commerce.	Global/Domestic Elite Roles in Contradiction.
Moral Acceptability of Domestic Service.	Naturalization of Liberal Governmentality.
Tightening of Educational Monopolies.	Primary Resource and Energy Dependence.
Resurgent Cultural Imperialism.	Exposure to Instabilities in World-Economy.
Social Relations	**Infrastructure/Technology**
Production of Hinterland.	Radial Pattern Transport Systems.
Urban Oligarchy & *Contadini*.	Declining Extramural Investment.
Acutely Asymmetric Centre-Periphery Relations.	Rising Property Prices Convergent on Metropole.
Declining Social Mobility Outside Power Elite.	Social Control through the Built Environment.
Entrenched Social Stratification Based on Place.	Prioritization of International Connectivities.
Hinterland Resentment of Metro Dominance.	Arterial over Capillary Systems in the Hinterland.
Proliferation of Courtesan Figurations.	Heightened Surveillance and Police Power.
Metropolitan Timocracy.	Peripheralization of Ecological Externalities.

Returning to our point in the Introduction, this is especially pertinent in the case of a putative 'crisis', for 'those who are able to define what the crisis is all about also hold the key to defining the appropriate strategies for [its] resolution' (t'Hart 1993, 41).

> A given constellation of contradictions and failures within the institutions of the state can sustain a multiplicity of conflicting narratives of crisis. Such narratives compete in terms of their ability to find resonance with individuals' and groups' direct, lived experiences, and not in terms of their 'scientific' adequacy as explanations for the condition they diagnose (Hay 1996, 255).

In a Kantian sense, concepts are epistemic contrivances that furnish us with at least a limited ability to shape the world by understanding it (See Adorno 1997). Irrespective of their scientific plausibility, they are potential weapons in the struggle against state power (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 239). In Foucault's notion of the 'will-to-knowledge' we then have a political inversion of the conventional terms of the scientific method. Rather than assume that knowledge forms are straightforwardly derived from the disinterested observation and assessment of objective phenomena, another way to look at a given piece of knowledge – or even an entire knowledge-complex – is to ask what interest there might be in the understanding, ordering, and presenting that phenomena in that particular way (Welsh, 2018b). This is not to deny the validity of objective knowledge. It is rather to bracket the relevance of that objectivity for the question at hand, and to treat the establishment of that knowledge as a question of power rather than merely validity. More accurately, it is a matter of perceiving the interest in governing in a particular way through the *production of truth* (Foucault 2002). Foucault's decisive question regarding the political relationship of truth to power was not that of validity, but that of the interest in governing made possible by 'knowing' in a particular way.

In short, the imperative to govern comes first, and appropriate knowledges are established, derived, contrived, to facilitate that way of governing. In respect of how we understand the social relations of the city-state, Lauro Martines has already made a similar observation: 'if we have learned anything from modern European sociology, it is that historical and social interests, not systems of logic, determine what shall count as knowledge' (1980, 201). Taking this position, a whole new complexion is put upon our question here regarding the validity or verisimilitude of our city-state concept in relation to the empirical 'facts' of the British-State. Though we might initially be sceptical of its validity as a scientific representation of objective sociological and geographical reality according to some correspondence notion of truth (which I actually think would be an overhasty assessment), when it comes to its utility for a critique of state power it begins to acquire a new plausibility and analytical acceptability. As it pertains to the British

state, the concept of the city-state therefore allows us to ask certain questions, arrive at certain political judgements, and so to initiate a certain kind of political engagement with state-power that would be both less legitimate and more difficult without it.

When conceptualised in this way, the social relations of the British state in particular can be more effectively destabilised, exposed to different and unexpected fields of discourse, and can be understood in ways that are true but which do not fit so easily and complacently into established models of formal analysis. Successfully to make this argument requires a comingling of efforts. On the one hand, the reader must absorb this notion of the 'production of truth' and assess the worthiness of the 'city-state' claim in these terms, rather than insist upon an empirically verifiable, exclusive, and exhaustive 'model'. On the other hand, the author cannot strain the correspondence of the concept with objective reality beyond plausibility as though it were infinitely elastic. One must guard against the *ignava ratio*, by which regulative principles are transformed from their legitimate role in the orientation of reason in its investigation of social phenomena into constitutive principles that are granted an automatic objective reality.

Quite simply, my purposes here are to invite the reader to consider the city-state concept as a novel and critically potent means of apprehending the empirical phenomena of the contemporary British state, but in a way that illuminates what is currently marginalised or obscured in other ways of presenting it. The point is to bring unfamiliar discourses into relation with our analyses of the British state, so as to open up the possibility for new and more effective political vocabularies, narratives, strategies, and organization. But how should this concept be situated? What is its discursive pedigree? And what exactly is an 'axiomatic'?

Theoretical Contexts: Critical Urban Theory and 'Axiomatics'

In our spatio-temporal analysis of the current crisis conjuncture, there are two pressing concerns: 1) the prospective relation of the British state-territory to the world-system in a post-Brexit reality; and 2) how that relation is connected to the internal configurations of the state-territory. In path-dependent fashion, this depends upon the historical trajectory in which the present crisis of the British state has come into being, but also upon the problem of 'spatiality'. It is out of the changing theorization of space in political geography that the city-state concept can be re-imagined and rethought as a device that brings these two concerns into relation with one another in the context of advanced capitalism. A passing familiarity with these critical theoretical developments will therefore be essential for grasping the 'axiomatic city-state' as a concept.

The city-state concept I am going to mobilize has been made possible by the recent emergence of *Critical Urban Theory* in the field of political geography (See Brenner 2016; Marcuse and Imbroscio 2014). Politically, critical urban theory is a *critical* mode of analysis that strikes in a Marxian spirit at the 'disjunction between the actual and the possible' in social phenomena (Brenner 2016, 29), but also recognizes, in Foucauldian-Nietzschean vein, the 'practical situatedness of all forms of knowledge' (Brenner 2016, 20), and strives therefore for knowledge that does not merely record but produces. Working on the assumption that knowledge and understanding are themselves forms of political practice (Bachmann and Moisio 2020, 254), the reasoning here is therefore as practical as it is normative, aiming at a combination of the two (Massey, 2004: 6). Epistemologically, its objective is to question geographic categories that 'sanctify, naturalize or legitimate extant sociospatial arrangements and the manifold injustices, dispossessions, dislocations, degradations and irrationalities upon which they are grounded' (Brenner 2016, 19). It is an agenda, the purpose of which being the 'constant reinvention of the framing categories, methods and assumptions of critical urban theory in relation to the rapidly, unevenly mutating geographies of capitalist urbanization, especially in the contemporary era of hyperfinancialized, planetary-scale spatial, institutional and ecological transformation' (Brenner 2016, 22). Most relevant to my argument, critical urban theory seeks especially to interrogate and rethink 'intra-national political spaces' in ways that are not beholden to the assumption that 'modern states are internally divided into diverse territorial jurisdictions and administrative subdivisions' (Brenner et al. 2003, 1), but are more difficult to model according to categories conventional to social science. Instead, critical urban theory assumes an especially significant place for social relations and relationality in what Henri Lefebvre famously called the 'social production of space' (1991; see also Roy 2009).

When thinking on the 'city-state', one ought therefore to cast from one's mind any comparison to the so-called city-states to be found in the contemporary world-system, such as Singapore or Vatican City. It is not with the conventional cartographic understanding of the city-state that I am dealing, but with a conceptualisation of social relations that is strikingly similar to those usually ascribed to the historical city-state. In light of the 'territorial turn' in the study of spatiality in political geography (See Agnew 1994, 2005, 2013; Brenner 1998; Elden 2013; Ruggie 1993; Walker 1992), the city-state concept explored here is not to be thought of in spatially extensive, 'container-like' blocks of sovereign space (Brenner 1999), nor as simply the 'radius of an imaginary circle' (Tilly 1986, 306), but rather as constellations of social relations that are coordinate with, and articulated by, a particular socio-spatial configuration of 'territory', 'place', 'scale', and 'network' – *TPSN* (See Jessop, Brenner, and Jones 2008).

Though unavoidable to some extent, of particular relevance here is the aversion in critical urban theory to 'ahistorical dualisms' and binaries of the kind normally entailed in the historically familiar and formal notion of the city-state: interior/exterior, city/countryside, urban/rural, society/nature, human/nonhuman, or material/symbolic (Brenner 2016, 218, 264–265). The axiomatic city-state ought not to be thought in a way that solidifies binaries such as these, no more than it ought to be thought through the 'container-like' space of a bounded *extensio* (Agnew 1996). By challenging such an epistemic framework, the more implausible version of a British city-state recedes, and another more sophisticated, versatile, and relational concept is given a chance to emerge.

In sum, there are two potential traps I wish to avoid by the 'axiomatic city-state' concept (See Brenner 2016, 216). These are: 1) that of assuming 'the universal diffusion of cities as the elementary units of human settlement'; and 2) that of conceiving cities 'as spatially bounded settlement units'. It is imperative to recognize therefore that 'these supposedly universal units have assumed diverse morphological forms', and that however one speaks of the city – Centre City, the urban field, or the 110-Mile City (Sharpe and Wallock 1987; Sudjic, 1993) – it must be in the most tentative, non-exhaustive, non-exclusive, and spatio-temporally particular terms. It is imperative in critical urban theory not necessarily to reject 'modelling', but not to be drawn into the 'taxonomic folly' that does epistemic violence to the imbricated object of analysis (Jessop, Brenner, and Jones 2008, 395–396). Instead, the axiomatic concept allows for urban assemblages to 'have been differentially articulated to their surrounding territories' (Brenner 2016, 216), but without approaching this particularity 'simply as unstructured empirical complexity' incapable of critical analysis. The concept allows us to navigate usefully between the repetition of structured systematicity and the historical contingency of spatio-temporal particularity.

The first problem of conceptualizing the relation of 'city' to 'state-territory', whilst struggling to free ourselves from any easily assumed dyad, is that it implies an ahistorical, exclusive, and hierarchical reification of city and state as 'two distinct and opposing bodies' (Isin, 2007, 215). This is if we slip into the 'scalar' way of thinking about 'space', as assumed by Charles Tilly and others in the institutionalist tradition (Blockmans 1994; Chittolini 1994; Keene 2004; Tilly 1986, 1994), to the exclusion of a more 'territorial' view typical of critical urban theory. What the conceptualisation of the city-state allows is a reversal of the conventional assumption in scalar thought, that, whilst the relationship between 'city' and 'state' might change in historical time, the content and form of the two as entities in an equation remains fixed. In contrast to this, the operation of arriving at the concrete via abstraction that is made possible by axiomatic conceptualisation permits us to hold the *relation* in some kind of historical stability – a possible iterative dynamic of the city-state form – whilst

being able radically to review the particularity of the components 'city' and 'state' set into the context of today's capitalist world-system.

This brings us then to the question of what is *axiomatic* in this 'city-state'? What we are dealing with here, in this 'axiomatic city-state', is a concept that will need some unpacking before it can be integrated into the analysis. Picked out from the assemblage-thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the second volume of their *Capitalism & Schizophrenia* (2013), the term 'axiomatics' alludes to 'a social machine of control and capture' (Lazzarato, 2015, 147–148). This refers to the control of populations and the capture of surpluses. The constitutive *axioms* of an axiomatic are 'operative statements that constitute the semiological form of Capital and that enter as component parts into assemblages of production, circulation, and consumption' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 537). Axioms are not 'theoretical propositions', nor are they 'ideological formulas', and *prima facie* they are quite obscure, yet they allow quite a supple handling of how the semiotic comes into relation with the material in advanced capitalism. Axioms 'constitute semiotic flows that enter into production in the same way as material flows' and crucially in a way that 'confronts and adapts to changing circumstances' (Lazzarato, 2015, 149). This scarcely seems less vague. However, a better appreciation of what axioms are will come by unfolding what they actually do. However, as a helpful indication, one might treat the claims of trickle-down economics (Pearl 2019), the privileging of metropolitan speech patterns (Kerswill 2003), or the instinctive laying out of infrastructure projects centred on the metropole (Hanley 2020), as coded axioms of the city-state (See Table 1).

What we are concerned with here more practically is the transformation, or rather *reconfiguration* of axioms corresponding to 'periods of change from one model of accumulation to another', and most specifically to 'the models of their realisation' (Lazzarato, 2015, 149). For this we must credibly account for the way that the abstract relates to the empirical in the concept. Axiomatic systems not only allow universal connections between arbitrary elements, but they also make it possible to connect heterogeneous elements without the need for the kind of formal homogenization required in scientific modelling. In short, they allow comparison while preserving the specificities of the concrete and particular domains under consideration. For Deleuze and Guattari, the axiomatic 'deals directly with purely functional elements and relations whose nature is not specified, and which are immediately realised in highly varied domains simultaneously' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 528). On the other hand, 'codes' are 'relative to those domains and express specific relations between qualified elements that cannot be subsumed by a higher formal unity (overcoding) except by transcendence and in an indirect fashion'. Axioms are therefore identifiable elements of an abstraction that finds expression in particularity through coding. This latter

is what I claim of the *axiomatic city-state*, to be understood hereafter as a spatio-temporal social formation in the form of an assemblage of the material and the semiotic, conceptualized at the threshold of the general and the particular, realised in its changing axioms, and analysed where the axioms of city-states are coded in particular ways as they encounter the capitalist social metabolism. To simplify, one might say that it is by axioms that our city-state is rendered familiar to Athens, Venice, Lübeck, and contemporary Singapore, and that it is the spatio-temporally particular coding of these axioms that make our city-state *sui generis* and unfamiliar either to these historical city-states or to a formal ideal-type.

To begin with the consideration of the axioms of the city-state, irrespective of spatio-temporal location, allows us to bracket momentarily the scepticism likely to arise over a British city-state, especially when compared formally with historical or ideal-typical 'models'. We begin with the abstraction, so as to establish the ground for the material observation. The concept of the axiomatic city-state allows an abstract exploration of axioms which can then be brought into relation with concrete social formations through coding. The point here is that city-state axioms imply a certain political dynamic commensurate to its iterative form and consistent logic, and it is to this dynamic that we should bend our thoughts. The conceptualization brings out this logic. It is then a matter of resituating the concept into the spatio-temporal particularity of a given constellation of social forces (British state), in order more fully to grasp and analyse political possibilities in a concretely historical social formation. That social formation, in our case, is the British metropolis, its role as ligature between the British state-territory and the world-system in which that state-territory is situated, and how it is implicated in the narrative of transformation that has brought us to our crisis conjuncture.

The Suspicion: Some Emerging Axiomatic Structures

In his simultaneously obscure and fascinating work of political theory – *Speed and Politics* (2006) – Paul Virilio made a remark instantly reminiscent of how social relations are experienced by many in the British state today. Virilio wrote of the interest of capitalism in establishing 'permanent strategic schemas', perhaps akin to 'capitalism's governing abstractions' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), at the centre of which exists the 'decisive knot of the capital where the right triumphs, and all around the vast camp of the suburbs and provinces that voted for the left because they were conscious of becoming a hinterland in which productive activity was on the decline' (Virilio 2006, 39, 40). This of course requires us to take 'left' and 'right' out of their conventional coordinates, but it effectively summarizes the strategic tableau of social relations across the British state-territory today. In the allusions of Bob Jessop

(1994) and John Agnew (2005), respectively, to a 'hollowing out' of industry across the country with 'generally negative macroeconomic effects on the state territory as a whole', we hear this remark of Virilio echoed and specified to the British context.

What is the reason for making such a claim? What is it about the contemporary British state that would even begin one thinking in terms of city-states? There is no need to plough through the usual economic and sociopolitical *ratios* of inequality and uneven development across the British state-territory, for these can not only be found in profusion elsewhere (Henderson and Ying Ho 2014; Bretan, 2017; Bounds, 2019; Mason 2019), but have now also become generally recognised truisms. For us to assume it as a point of departure, it is sufficiently evident that a clearly asymmetric gap has emerged between the metropolitan assemblage and the rest of the political community, in terms of demographic composition, cost of living, income distribution, access to amenities, infrastructural cohesion, etc., etc. But these are only merely indications, for behind statistics lies an entire politics of selection, prioritization, and edited presentation. Something more discursive is necessary. In the Brexit narrative, these asymmetries are the result variously of immigration, EU regulation, international fiscal transfers to European states, and to some extent the machinations of internationalist left-liberals. Rather than the symptoms of a strategic reorientation of British political economy according to the axioms of the city-state formation, the asymmetries are interpreted in terms of the nation-state formation, and thus ascribed to the loss of *national* independence.

However, *de-nationalisation* is an emerging axiom of the post-industrial city-state of 'globalisation'. The splintering of the nation-state would seem to be one of the requisite historical developments for a city-state formation to emerge (Keene 2004, 463–464), and this appears to be what we are experiencing in the British state-territory. Though it might be hasty to assume that 'globalisation' is 'accompanied by the crisis of the democratic nation-state' (Tonkiss 2006, 3–4, 56–61), there is a tendency towards its questioning at least. Though the state is far from dead (Aronowitz and Bratsis, 2002; Parenti, 2015), we might well be witnessing the melting away of the 'national referent' (Smith 1998, 50–51; Agnew 2017) and thus a 're-territorialisation' of the perennial *Urstaat* (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 528–529). Saskia Sassen sees

> . . . new geographies of centrality and marginality that cut across the old divide of poor/rich countries, and new geographies of marginality that have become increasingly evident not only in the less developed world *but inside highly developed countries* (Sassen 2000, 85).

If it is true that 'the contemporary round of globalization has radically reconfigured the scalar organization of territorialization processes . . . *relativizing* the significance of the national scale while simultaneously *intensifying* the

role of sub and supra-national forms of territorial organization' (Brenner; 1999, 52), then the global city assemblage can plausibly emerge as one way for the capitalist state to navigate these re-territorializations. In these 'processes of denationalization' (Sassen 2006, 2), it seems that 'top-level functions are consolidating in cities that are transcending their national attachments', and the resultant global financial system shall continue to be 'enormously volatile' (Sassen 1999, 87). This would require a closer relationship between city and state in the regulation of capitalism. Quite simply,

> the de-nationalizing of urban space and the formation of new claims centered in transnational actors and involving contestation constitute the global city as a frontier zone for a new type of engagement (Sassen 2000, 92).

Flowing from this de-nationalization, the asymmetries in centre-periphery relations have become axiomatic in Britain over recent decades, and this is something highly indicative of city-state formations. Set against emerging literature calling for a federalising of the British state (Henderson and Ying Ho 2014), recent proposals like the Northern Pound reflect not merely the growing disparity in the cost of living, purchasing power, and economic activity, but the growing political recognition of this disparity in the periphery. Britain is one of the most centralised state systems amongst the capitalist core states and the consequence of this is a massive concentration of economic, political, and cultural power into the metropolitan assemblage (Henderson and Ying Ho 2014, 38). This is clear in just a few illustrative examples. In the financial year 2011–2012, the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport spent £450 million on major national cultural institutions, of which £49 per capita went to London and £1 per capita went to the rest of England (Stark, Gordon, and Powell 2013). Asymmetry in centre-periphery relations, and more importantly the particular character of this asymmetry, are something that is constituted out of axioms familiar from city-states. However, in the case of the Brexit narrative, these asymmetries are interpreted through a national framework of government policy choices, overbearing EU regulation, and the activities of a cabal of internationalist quislings, rather than the more geographical imperatives of the city-state formation.

Whilst the state endures, the nation dematerializes in the city-state imaginary. Whatever horizon of expectation we have, the nation as single social referent will likely not be it. Likewise, the 'container-like' category of 'society' is also called into question (Agnew 1994, 69–70). So what referent, or rather 'shared common element' (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 100), do we have that is propitious for radical struggle? What is the latest historical territorialisation of '"belonging" and "not belonging", "us" and "them"' (Anderson 1996, 141)? To this we shall have to return.

Turning to strategic *financialisation*, a 'state of enduring austerity' characterises not merely the political economy of the British state generally

(Jessop 2017, 136; see also Jessop, 2016; Seymour, 2014), but more acutely the relation between the metropole and the provincial regions. Expanding reproduction has been replaced by 'redistributive dispossession' as the dominant accumulation strategy in the British state since the 1980s (Bin, 2018; Harvey 2003, 153; 2006, 162). Financialisation is directly and deeply implicated in this transformation, and it is the axioms of state financialisation that reproduce the enduring and deepening asymmetries of centre and periphery.

Whilst not definitive of them, financialization as a set of axioms is iteratively associated with city-state formations (Keene 1999, 2004; Martines 1980), and nowhere is this axiomatic more acutely evident, both historically and contemporaneously, than in the London metropole (Keene 2004, 470). As the national referent weakens, financialisation connects metropolitan assemblages with other nodes in the 'world-cities archipelago' (Friedmann and Wolff 1982), that is to say a 'geography of strategic places at the global scale, places bound to each other by the dynamics of economic globalization' (Sassen 2000, 80). Accepting that metropolitan elites have declared Britain 'open for business' through financialisation, and that these 'culturally homogenous and socially connected' pan-global *econocrats* 'cohere around a sort of shared lingua franca' of cultural and ideological axioms (Davis 2017, 595), is it then unsurprising that government in that state has been dominated by 'competing and uncoordinated ties to foreign capital' (Jessop 2017, 135)? However, to the extent that these ties *are* coordinated, it is through the metropolitan assemblage.

As a central engine of 'capital resurgent' (Duménil and Lévy 2004), financialisation of course rarely features critically in elite-driven Brexit discourses. On the contrary, it is lionised as the *national* breadwinner, and its strategic role in the profound geographic reconfiguration of accumulation patterns and social relations across the British state-territory are not usually appreciated, even amongst the inchoate criticisms of the metropole sometimes found in the consequently declining semi-periphery. Breaking down the national-state framework, through which financialised capital is positioned as the national champion, the city-state concept has the potential to reveal the more sorrowful story of anti-development across the state territory.

The Keynesian or Polanyian problem of development with which we are then faced in the city-state, is that the 'financial claims on the "real" economy have grown as industrial productivity and output has failed to keep pace with financialisation … This has increased the mass and share of profits going to interest-bearing capital at the expense of profit-producing capital that creates internationally tradeable commodities' (Jessop 2017, 135). What is lacking is the kind of alliance between productive capital and re-organised labour that would put finance to work for the 'real economy' (Helleiner, 1993), and this alliance requires the appropriate conceptual tools and counternarratives in the

absence of effective societal or national referents. As dubious as the category of productive capital, let alone the 'real' economy, might be for some (Van der Pijl 2012), this kind of agenda would reposition capital markets into a more 'embedded' relationship with the democratic, stable, and long-term realisation of surpluses across the state-territory (Apeldoorn and Overbeek, 2012, 13; See also Polanyi 2001). The objective transformations of the last four decades of British political economy have quite simply been the exact opposite (See Gamble 1994, 2009; Harvey 2003, 2005, 2010; Glyn, 2006 ; Foster and Magdoff, 2009), and more closely conform to city-state axioms by which liquidity, fluidity, and virtuality of capital take strategic priority over the plodding tempos of production, investment, use-value, and social development.

This brings us to *rent-seeking*, and the urban-assemblage as a facilitating socio-spatial formation opposite for the establishment of rent-seeking positions in a strategic constellation of social relations. As the Italian city-states increasingly took on a 'rentier role' by the 17th century, running on borrowed glories and their 'territorial advantage' (Chittolini 1994, 39), can we not discern something similar in the British city-state and its vertices of capture in the global matrices of financialised value? The gilded decline and geostrategic marginalisation that took centuries in the first case could take just decades in the second. This chimes with Martin Wolf's metaphor of 'an out-of-control financial sector' that is 'eating out the modern market economy from inside, just as the larva of the spider wasp eats out the host in which it has been laid' (2011). In this light, the relationship between the state and its territory takes on a new political complexion that nevertheless is beholden to the perennial political question – *qui bono*? As an axiom of distribution, rent-seeking is highly germane to the financialised city-state in a way that it is not in many other state formations, particularly the nation-state.

In fact, a strategic shift to rent-seeking is simply the political economic linchpin of a broader socio-cultural shift in the political tropes of British society towards a species of urban *neofeudalism*. Whilst it is true to speak of a 'hypertrophied rent-seeking financial sector' (Jessop 2017, 136), to restrict the critique to the institutions of money-capital is inadequate. The restoration of property-power in the British state, the return of Old Etonians to dominate the cabinet, and the proliferation of London-centric, conservative cultural propaganda from *Harry Potter*, through *Downton Abbey*, all the way to *The Crown*, all indicate the cultural inscription of neo-feudal mores that are more fitting to the rentier political economy that infuses, informs, nourishes it. Inculcated with these mores, the hegemonic Brexit narrative contains little critique of rent-seeking activities and the establishment of rent-seeking socio-economic positions concentrated in the metropole. On the contrary, in the semiotic mind-map of the city-state that conflates fictional capital and productive capital, rent-seeking is translated into entrepreneurialism, and

'external' limitation placed upon it (i.e. EU) is blamed for the low growth and anti-development that the city-state has enforced upon its hinterland.

Parenthetic to the anti-development of the hinterland, the growth in 'producer services' for finance (See Sassen 2001), and the evanescence of any societal or national solidarity in the city-state's imaginary, acutely servile forms of labour once again reappear as a major source of 'employment'. Andre Görz's allusion to 21st century post-industrial capitalist core states populated by *The New Servants* seems acutely and especially prescient in the British context (2012 [1991]), as the euphemistic shift over to service labour in Britain over the last three decades seems to bear out. Eminently suitable to city-state axioms of consumption, finance, oligarchy restoration, redistributive dispossession, and what Deleuze and Guattari called 'anti-production' (1983, 28), the steady replacement of an industrial workforce with a servant class of immigrant and native labourers has engendered a great appetite for both low wage immigrants and surpluses of chronically underemployed domestic labour (I include here not just literal domestic workers, but a whole range of keyworker categories in care, hospitality, and entertainment industries). Once again, in the Brexit narrative the boom in immigrant domestic servant numbers, as well as the malignant disciplinary effects upon the condition of labour in general, are ascribed to both the EU and the immigrants themselves. In that narrative, it is not connected to the interests of a dominant metropolitan oligarchy of rentiers and its auxiliaries, which has captured government policy, successfully established an ideological and anti-democratic acceptance of servility once again in the political culture, and which continues to appropriate and dispossess in a low growth environment by virtue of the accumulated and mutually reinforcing axioms of the city-state formation.

As a great facilitator to the material reconfiguration in the British state-territory, the regnant *liberal ideology of the city* is an essential component of the hegemonic politics of the axiomatic city-state. One could argue that this ideology is what coordinates and makes acceptable the various axioms of the city-state, whilst at the same time being strengthened and deepened by those axioms. In liberal ideology, London is assumed unproblematically to be the 'powerhouse' of the UK economy (Pickford 2013, 2; See also Graham 2010). In keeping with the obsession with knowledge-economy as the 'hegemonic economic imaginary' of neoliberalism (Jessop 2017, 134), metropolitan elites are assumed to be a 'creative class' of value-producers (Florida 2005), and emphatically not as value-capturers. From within liberal ideology, it is never acknowledged that oligarchic organization might be immanent to the commune/city formation (Martines 1980). The preferred tableau is Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*(1989 [1724]), and its Grumbling Hive as the great originator. There appears to be a contest taking place in the British state between 'overarching ideologies' of territorial integrity (Chittolini 1994), such as nationalism and social democracy, and a kind of 'city-state chauvinism' emerging in

liberal metropolitan ideology (Karatasli 2016). The critical conceptual innovations of critical urban theory problematize the epistemological skein of this discursive struggle, and the 'axiomatic city-state' offers a more normative and affirmative supplement to these problematizing innovations.

Conclusion: Implications for Political Practice and Analysis

Through de-industrialisation, financialisation, concentration, and monopolisation, the way in which the fixities and flows of accumulation have been reconfigured geographically across the British state-territory over the last four decades leaves us with a formation ever more approximate to a city-state than to either a nation-state, federal-state, or any other recognisable state form. The way in which its political economy is predicated upon rent-seeking, property-power, fictitious capital, and asset inflation is reminiscent of the city-state. However, the city-state is more than just the character of its political economy. The ever-more proprietorial, stratified, and servile character of the state's social structure is axiomatic of city-states. The cultural imperialism that is projected outward in media, film, speech patterns, and cultural export commodities recalls the centripetal dominance of city-states. The infrastructural proclivity towards radial systems and arterial networks that advantages the metropolitan hub is a *sine qua non* of the city-state. When the ideological valorisation of the entrepreneurial capitalist, the vilification of the parochial, the idolising of the mercurial, are joined by anti-labour attitudes regarding the origin of economic value, then the city-state is not far behind. As these axioms of the city-state become more familiar across the British state-territory (See Table 1), the need to give them coherent expression through 'representational strategies' becomes more and more valuable to those for whom life in the city-state is not quite the Panglossian best-of-all-possible-worlds it is implicitly assumed to be.

It is around this point that such an apparently forthright and reductive representation of City-State Britain can be justified, and the 'value-added' in the concept of the axiomatic city-state be clarified. Whilst unpalatable to some, this kind of 'participatory approach' to human geography is intended as one of those 'specifically *geographical* contributions that our discipline can make to broader debates on participation' (Kesby 2007, 2813). This kind of public geography does not aim at policy formation (Murphy 2013, 142; Thrift 2002, 293; Ward 2006; Fuller 2008), but casts its net further afield, instigating debates (See Ward 2006, 499), and striving to be of political, intellectual, and critical utility for a variety of publics (Murphy 2006, 2; Ward 2007; Moseley 2010; Staeheli and Mitchell 2008).

Having said this, there is a more unabashed and committed objective in this intervention. As mentioned in the Introduction, the current importance of normative conceptualisation during this crisis conjuncture should not be

underestimated, if we are to *re-identify, re-define* and *re-constitute* that crisis towards more efficacious engagement with 'state power' as indicated by Colin Hay. Moreover, the concept provides for a more politically succinct grasp of the counternarrative I have offered above for those currently languishing under the hegemonic narrative of Brexit. Who are those people? They are the *contadini* of the hinterland. It is for them that this concept and counter-narrative are produced.

My point here has been that when we start to consider the British state in terms of a city-state a strategic alteration takes place in our thinking. What is celebrated transforms into something that requires critique, what is considered an aleatory misfortune becomes a systematic iniquity, what appears transient becomes something structural, and what seemed necessary and natural becomes something contingent and political. However, within these more abstract implications of the shift in analytical framing that I am advocating here, there is a whole range of potential effects upon practical political concerns of the moment. What kind of political effects might one expect to flow from this analytical re-orientation, and what implications might there be for practical political activity?

One implication pertains to *class*, and how to think strategically about the social contours of political subordination in the British state (See Welsh, 2019). Political analysis predicated upon the axiomatic city-state has the potential to shift our understanding of class from that of a sociological category or identity group towards an understanding of class as the 'common shared element' and isomorphic contour in the relations of subordination generated by a given mode of production. In other words, we can break free from the categorical construction of class that relies upon 'identity-thinking' to bind heterogeneous individuals into taxonomic groups. Given the crisis in the institutions of disciplinary power through the end of the 20th century (Deleuze, 1992, Welsh, 2018a), and the movement into post-Fordist production regimes (See Offe 1985; Piore and Sabel 1984; Amin, 1994; Lash and Urry, 1985), fresh conceptualizations and analytical frameworks are needed to apprehend the 'social factory' and the constitution of classes both within new and emergent sites of production and outside of those immediate sites of production (Gill and Pratt 2008; Negri 1992). The way in which the Brexit referendum cut across those cherished class categories of the industrial era to which we have complacently and obsessively cleaved, and in so doing defied both our expectations and our ability to explain, is surely an indication that a radically renovated cartography of class in the British state-territory is not only possible, but exigent. In a British state dominated by a global city assemblage, it is no longer in localized sites of production alone, such as the factory, that classes are formed, but across the state-territory as a whole by the subordinating material and symbolic relations generated from the metropolitan hub. With this view in mind, class formations can be perceived

geographically in a way that facilitates explanation of what is happening, whilst not doing violence to the heterogeneity and plurality of the population.

A second effect of this analysis applies to the formation and organization of *political parties* and *social movements*. The city-state concept provides something of an indication as to why we are experiencing a series of minority governments, general disillusionment with the extant array of political parties, and why the identification of each party's 'natural constituency' is proving such a difficult task (Henderson and Ying Ho 2014, 30). Extending the implications for our understanding of class brings us to the further prospect of the reformation in political parties and social movements. The city-state concept opens the door for critical, radical, and progressive political parties to construct coherent political programmes that appeal to emergent constituencies in the electorate. By traversing the isomorphic contours the concept establishes, political parties and social movements can perceive common interest between groups previously assumed to be either at odds or irrelevant to one another. Recognising how the politics of a second-generation unemployed Sheffield steelworker, the disgruntled Aberdeenshire Scottish nationalist farmer, and the first generation Turkish immigrant Zone 1 *au pair* might not be mutually antagonistic, but rather oriented strategically around the same subordinating relations established by the city-state assemblage, is essential for the future survival of critical and progressive parties. Though such a radical reconfiguration in the political map of Britain might be a transient or unstable development – witness the fleeting success of UKIP in harnessing such novel and emergent reconfigurations – it is by no means certain that such reconfigurations will remain unstable into the future. Political parties must get ahead of the game, and new conceptualisations on the strategic level are the first move in that game.

Perhaps most obviously, and most pressingly, this analysis has potential for explaining and thus counter-narrativizing the constitutional revolution that seems to be taking place currently: namely, Scottish independence and Brexit. In terms of the increasingly acute prospect of *Scottish secession*, schooled in devolution, the 2014 Referendum, and heralded in the clamour for further referenda, the city-state concept poses the problem not in national terms, but in the terms of self-determination. According to this reading, Scottish independence is therefore a movement energised by anti-metropolitan politics, rather than an anti-English nationalism. It is generally accepted that Scottish nationalism is more akin to a self-determination struggle of this stamp than it is to all those ethno-nationalisms of post-Soviet Europe (Lavery 2019; Nairn 1981). Anti-metropolitan struggle in Scotland can work through the template or framework of a putative Scottish 'nation', in a way that kindred struggles across the British Isles cannot. One might even argue that Northern English trade unionism constituted a similar framework, but was defeated and disintegrated politically in the 1980s, rendering the Northern *contadini* of the

emerging city-state bereft of any framework for countervailing political organization beyond the *jacquerie*. This would further hint at an explanation for the greater anti-internationalism in Northern England that is given inchoate expression through sporadic anti-metropolitan invective directed vaguely at an amorphous London establishment, and which contrasts with the resurgent and less misanthropic internationalism north of the border. The Scottish nation can reorient itself in the international order once free of the 'British' global city, the English provinces cannot. At least this seems to be the implicit impression.

When it comes to *Brexit*, we are dealing with a highly convoluted and multidimensional political problem that defies monocausal explanation or even coherent modelling. There is no space adequately to explore here the development of British withdrawal from EU in all its cultural, social, economic, and political aspects, but a word can be said regarding the utility of the axiomatic city-state concept for its analysis. Suffice it to say here that there is more than enough reason to suspect strongly that disaffection with EU, along with obsessive concentration on the 'Immigration Question' in the opinion-forming organs, is only partially a matter of EU membership and its institutions (Jessop 2017, 136–137; Henderson and Ying Ho 2014, 30). It is difficult to imagine that pro-Brexit sentiment in the former industrial regions of the English provinces would have been so high without the declining relative and absolute standard of living there resulting from the socio-economic reconfigurations of the city-state (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017, 451). A great part of disaffection with EU seems to be a redirected disaffection with the metropolitan liberal establishment and its associations with international finance and transnational money-capital (Jessop 2017, 138), in whose interests immigration policy in the British state has been determined for decades. The city-state concept allows us to distil the self-determination struggle from the ostensibly xenophobic and nationalist politics of Brexit supporters in the provinces of England, and thus to find another and legitimate voice of dissent amongst the contadini of the British city-state. What one does with this counternarrative, however, is another matter.

Finally, as a contribution to geographical research that can 'facilitate empowerment in ways that enable participants to develop solutions in their own lives' (Kesby 2007, 2814), I argue that there is a *personal utility* in understanding the British state-territory through this concept. Recognizing the city-state character of the British polity can be of significant help in making strategic decisions regarding one's personal life-course. Understanding the structured constraints entailed by city-state formations, and therefore one's likely future prospects for wealth, security, social mobility, employment, family support, home-ownership, etc., can be of great use for possible immigrants, emigrants, students, parents, investors, workers, and citizens who must

make choices for their future well-being in a state-territory that is decreasingly national and societal.

My offering of the axiomatic city-state as a conceptualisation of the reconfigured, and re-configuring, social relations characteristic of the British state, is provisional, non-exhaustive, non-exclusive, and exploratory. Less a dogmatic *metanarrative*, as might be said of the vulgar Brexit discourse, it is more a species of Alex Murphy's both normative and reflexive *grand regional narrative* (2013, 132), which he sees as essential to more potent 'public geographies'. There are indeed innumerable problems with the concept. However, although the intention has been primarily to stimulate, provoke, challenge, postulate, and certainly not to prove or convince unequivocally, it has nevertheless been to present a normative platform for further critical analysis of the British state.

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