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After Belonging: The Objects, Spaces and Territories of the Ways We Stay in Transit

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Never at home

The 2016 Oslo Architecture Triennale, entitled 'After Belonging', opened on 8th September and closed on 27th November. By chance, it fell roughly between the UK's referendum on EU membership and the USA's presidential election. If we are to believe the promises made by the victors of these two events, it is likely that this period will come to be seen as a paradigmatic turning point in world history: the moment at which the post-war globalist project of universal human rights, prosperity and peace was fatally wounded.

Like the Triennale itself, the eponymous Catalogue aims to 'consider the precarious structural conditions of contemporary neoliberal regimes... by examining how particular objects, spaces and territories are designed and managed'.¹ This reading of globalisation centres on a kind of historical materialist geographical study. Whilst the typical touchstone for this reading might also be the work of Foucault, his theories show limitations to the scales and complexities demanded by our current condition. Foucault never examines the domestic (except as a discrete unit of control), or the total limits of capitalism as a sphere of influence (he is more preoccupied

with population management through surveillance and work on the self). More properly, the methodology and ideology of 'After Belonging' seems to speak to LeFebvre's *Production of Space* and *Critique of Everyday Life* or Jean Baudrillard's *System of Objects*. In these texts the authors lay out a kind of Marxian semiotics that unifies all social power relationships from the level of household furniture to the grand historical narrative of capitalism.

It is the scope and insistence on material evidence that recalls the work of LeFebvre and Baudrillard in the Catalogue. With more than 100 texts (and even more individual authors), the book is nothing short of exhaustive. It traverses space and time in a fairly comprehensive way. But for this reason it is also extremely hard to extract a hierarchy, or to highlight any single contribution above another.

What does it mean to belong? Bizarrely, and perhaps strategically, the Catalogue is never explicit, although it offers a suggestion in what it is not: 'Belonging is no longer just something bound to one's own space of residence or to the territory of a nation, nor does it last an entire lifespan.'² Presumably then, belonging may be the long-term domestic and social stability within an identifiable region or territory. Thus, the conditions that *After Belonging* addresses most directly are the ambiguous consequences of globalisation. On one side, we have mass-mobility and a multitude of new possibilities for communication, cross-cultural exchange and economic growth. 'But not everybody circulates voluntarily, nor in the same way: circulation promotes growing inequalities for large groups, kept in precarious states of transit.'³

The general theme of 'belonging' is present throughout, although the editorial structure, focussed on domesticity, rather waxes and wanes. Nonetheless, the ambition to 'destabilise the various definitions of the house characterised by the most canonical architectural expressions of residence'⁴ is particularly pertinent. By questioning 'the seamless construction of homeliness as a unity grounded in intimacy, privacy and rootedness,'⁵ *After Belonging* posits the house 'as an unstable aggregate of objects, bodies, spaces, institutions, technologies and imaginations'.⁶ What emerges from this framework, methodology and body of research is a singular proposition as relevant for its timing as its subject matter. Reflecting on the Triennale just two months after its closure, it is even more urgent to examine what will come after *After Belonging*. What is globalisation? What are neo-liberal regimes? How will the home, house and notion of belonging, long implicated in modern staccato, be transformed?

There are two very different kinds of globalisation that underpin *After Belonging*. The first is the liberal project conceived in the shadow of the Second World War, which aimed to unite nations, prepare the way for a global state and eradicate the many ills of the human condition (war, poverty, starvation, torture, abuse, exploitation, etc.). At its most extreme, this form of globalisation—or rather globalism—finds its roots in a moment of rare collective existential clarity, typified by the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights. With some humility, we suddenly understood ourselves as immensely fragile: not much more than a clumsy, violent species rolling around the surface of a microscopic

blue marble (later captured so powerfully in Apollo 8's 'Earthrise' photograph). The dual tenets of this form of universal, just, globalisation were strong international institutions and equitable domestic policies. On the one hand were entities of varying success, such as the UN, EU, NATO, UNHCR, World Bank and IMF. On the other, many Western nations implemented broad social-democratic strategies from across the political spectrum on housing, employment, public space and infrastructure, now often lumped together as the Welfare State. The utopian endpoint of this direction was an atomic-powered world of automated factories and universal leisure.

In the late 1970s, this project suffered a number of setbacks and was eventually diverted by a small group of politicians and economists, mostly from advanced Western nations. They rose to power on the back of popular disaffection with state systems that promoted (or were themselves built on the premise) of social homogeneity. This group espoused a new kind of ultra-liberal attitude, founded on the subject of the individual consumer. They used concepts such as the entrepreneurial spirit and the promise of greater wealth to win over populations that would in fact never have it so good ever again—populations that were in fact at the historical apex of social equality, social mobility, scientific progress and wealth distribution. Neo-liberalism, as it has come to be known, has never been a monolithic or universal ideology. As Neil Brenner articulated so excellently in his book *New State Spaces*,⁷ it is an ongoing process of wealth redistribution that advances by deconstructing the national institutions that threaten its survival. In

this sense, it is a kind of ideological parasite or virus. From the 1970s to the 2000s it went through several distinct phases, and adapted itself to contexts as geopolitically disparate as Chile, Britain and China.

Broadly speaking, one of the effects of neo-liberalism is to reformulate cultural and moral relationships between politics and economics. It subsumes all political ideologies under its economic ones, which it claims belong somehow to the scientific realm and are therefore impartial. Tax holidays for the ultra-wealthy, deregulation of labour markets, commodification and privatisation of state assets—these are all executed in the pursuit of ‘growth’ and ‘market efficiency’, which, because they appear to lie outside moral or political spheres, become invisible to critique as a result.

Marx described the basic functioning of capitalism excellently: he said that as time goes forward automation necessarily replaces unskilled labour.⁸ This both concentrates more capital in the hands of those who control the means of production, as well as creating a growing number of unskilled precarious workers that are unemployed and now unemployable. Neo-liberal globalisation made only three modest interventions in this process: it reformulated the state as simply another type of corporation that could be asset-stripped; it used personal debt, particularly mortgage-housing, to suck any surplus or latent capital from the lower and middle classes (it is now using the sharing economy to the same effect); it harnessed the post-war liberal project as a pacifying smokescreen for expanding its sphere of resources. The consequences of these processes—wholly foreseeable as far back as the early 1970s—would be to concentrate wealth in

society into a super-elite (the so-called 1%); create an indebted underclass (the 99%); and discredit any opposing ideology external to capitalism itself.

There are large segments of the American and English (but not so much British) populations that have been made economically redundant by this neo-liberal model of globalisation in recent decades. They are predominantly white, over 50, working or middle class and located in post-industrial, rural geographies. Neo-liberalism promises universal wealth and delivers mass poverty. It is like nationalism in this respect, in that it functions in the exact opposite manner to what you might think. Nationalism promises unity and strength against a common enemy, but has a long history of delivering internal division and oppression. Nationalists tend to hate disobedient citizens within their own territory as much or more than they do those outside it. So it was with McCarthy’s ‘reds under the bed’; it is also true that Republicans today hate Obama much more than they mistrust Putin (in fact, 37% of party members actively admire Putin).⁹

Perhaps this explains the extremely odd paradoxes of 2016. The white working middle classes, who since Reagan have been the most enthusiastic supporters of neo-liberal policies, reconstituted themselves as a popular uprising against their own interests. In effect, after voting for decades across the political divide for actions to deregulate, denationalise and deconstruct the state, the result was the massive transferral of public assets and future wealth to a very small elite. Then, not connecting their own history with this process, they selected a candidate who is the epitome of the ‘big business’

they now claim to hate. Maybe it takes a plutocrat to overthrow plutocracy, time will tell.

In the United Kingdom it is an even worse situation: Brexiteers could not have known what they were voting for, because no specific vision for Brexit was ever outlined by either side of the debate. The most common points that came up in post-referendum interviews were all related to national government policies that Brexiteers had all presumably voted for at some point: the introduction of precarious employment, housing scarcity, expensive privatised utilities, poor investment in infrastructure, etc. It is all well and good to complain about figures like Thatcher and Blair but, if they were so unpopular, why did they continue to win thumping majorities?

The consequence of these two events is that the positive kind of globalisation—the inclusive, democratic, institutional, peace-loving kind—has been undermined and destroyed over several decades, whilst the neo-liberal kind thrived in its place. This is an underlying assertion that ties many of the contributions of *After Belonging* together: portrayed through a myriad of examples, all concerned with transit and movement and broadly focussed on the home. These range from the logistics of refugee boats in the Mediterranean (Forensic Architecture), to an analysis of the 2013 ISIS annual report (Keller Easterling), to techno-religious communities in Lagos or the future of home-sharing platforms (OMA).

The Catalogue—and indeed the whole Triennale by extension—is posited as research; or, rather, the

pursuit of a subject and not its resolution. Whilst many projects do set out a proposition that addresses the present, just as many poignantly identify the problematics of the coming decades.

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Notes and references

1. *After Belonging*, p.14.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
7. Neil Brenner, *New State Spaces* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004).
8. Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (London, Penguin Classics, 1990), Chapter 15, pp. 492–636.
9. Matthew Nussbaum, Benjamin Oreskes, 'More Republicans Viewing Putin Favorably', *Politico* (last modified 16th December, 2016); <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/gop-russia-putin-support-232714>.

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