

Editorial

Divided Britain

I grew up with the notion that Britain was divided into a prosperous south and a poorer north. Everything from accent to industry reinforced this divide. The explanation which was convincingly pedalled to us as students studying economic geography and history in the later years of high school and at university was that the climate of the British island was gentler in the south and thus the population density was higher with more market towns serving a more prosperous agricultural economy. Only when iron ore and coal were discovered and when textile production which required water power became significant in the embryonic industrial revolution did the north open up economically. During the nineteenth century there was a dramatic turn around. Northern towns grew rapidly to serve the new heavier industries, which essentially built the export base for the entire country but by the end of the century, the first shoots of this industrial revolution were being extinguished as new markets opened up globally and the industrial mantle passed to the United States and to Germany. The north began its century-long decline, first evident in the Long Depression of the 1870s and then massively accelerated by the Great Depression of the interwar years. Britain was drifting back, it was claimed, to the geography that was pictured in the Domesday Book, the first census created by William the Conqueror in 1086.

There was also a physical reason for this division. Climatically more clement regions lay south of a line drawn from the Wash which bounds East Anglia to the north, to the River Exe which marked the division of the south from the true west country of Devon and Cornwall. North and west of this line the climate was cooler and wetter. But the country too had been ruled for a 1000 years from a London south of the line and the prosperity that came with this rule also reinforced the dominant culture and accents of the south which essentially became the received way to speak English, now reflected in what we call 'BBC English'. The north was regarded as remote, crude, dirty even, where people spoke strangely with strong accents. This then was the conventional wisdom of a divided Britain and to an extent this is still the picture that is cemented in the British psyche. Over the last 75 years, since Second World War and before, the picture has been reinforced by the fact that there has been a consistent and continuing migration of the brightest and the best from north to south.

There are many aspects of this divide that are reflected in everything from the physical development of the country to voting patterns. In our group at CASA in UCL, we are exploring the way the road network has developed since pre-Roman times using diffusion theory. In essence, if we examine the entire network of roads in Britain as a percolation problem, we can identify a very coherent pattern of national, regional and city system divides. We essentially start with the whole network and impose a distance threshold where all the road segments are connected. We then reduce this distance progressively and identify the connected clusters that are revealed as the threshold falls. This enables us to build a very intricate hierarchy that shows how Britain splits into its constituent parts. Scotland first splits off, then the relatively hilly areas of the Lake District and Snowdonia in the north and Wales follow but then the fun begins. Urban England of the north splits from London and the South East, thus revealing the way the country divides itself into north and south (Arcaute et al., 2015). This line is close to that of the Wash-Exe division we noted above but what is remarkable is that all this cultural separation is encoded historically into the road network – the connectivity of the country – that has developed over several hundred years. We have also related this partitioning to recent voting patterns as well as economic differences such as the massive concentration in the south east of much richer populations (Arcaute et al., 2014; Martin, 2015).

Yet there is another reason factored into these explanations. It is only possible to continue a drift from one part of the country to another over a century or longer if there are distinct positive feedback effects that reinforce such migrations. In his book *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850--1980*, Wiener (1981) develops the argument that Britain never quite grasped the spirit of the industrial revolution. As soon as the entrepreneurs made a lot of money, instead of ploughing it back into their industries, they tended to move south, purchase country houses and adopt the lifestyle of the idle rich that had become the norm since medieval times. In short, the industrial revolution in Britain was never followed through: it failed to ignite or combust. The reaction can only be described as a cultural response still strongly rooted in contemporary attitudes – a disdain for the dirty business of making money. Some may object that all this has begun to change and the cutting edge after a century of decline has changed with the development of a new young entrepreneurial spirit. This would be convincing if it was not restricted to London and was powered much more indigenously rather than through selective immigration drawing talent from the rest of the world.

The north–south divide has been a very active focus in urban and regional planning since the 1920s and there have been a succession of policy initiatives designed to do what is now called a ‘rebalancing’ of the economy (Martin, 2015). Decentralising public sector infrastructure has been a favourite ploy but also a succession of government subsidies for declining industries have been key. But nothing seems to have stopped the tide. Now new infrastructure projects – high-speed rail (HS2) for example – is in the frame as part of the need to revive the northern powerhouse – the cities that span the line from Liverpool through Manchester to Leeds-Sheffield thence to Newcastle. None of this is going to work. If it does, it would have done so years ago. Everyone has their own solution but I would argue that we must break the vicious circle of cumulative causation – the positive feedback effects that make people drift south. The university sector in Britain is now so big a proportion of the economy that if we were to really reinvigorate our northern universities by increasing their ability to recruit the best globally, the best would stay. Many of the top universities worldwide show that many students who study there stay in the place they study. If we could do this in the north, it might provide the momentum for a new economy. Given that we have a very high proportion of foreign students in the UK system, their abilities and motivations could well break the spiral of outward migration to the richer south. Instead of HS2 and like projects, we need to provide a new basis for our universities so our best are not just in the golden triangle centred on Oxford-London-Cambridge. This could be done by a simple deregulation of how our universities recruit. A little bit of positive discrimination bringing more student migrants to the north, could well start the process.

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References

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