
‘A year on’ – Brexit and the Embodied Power of Place among Finnish Expatriates in the UK

Evi-Carita Riikonen*†¹

¹University of Eastern Finland (FINLAND) (UEF) – Joensuu, Finland

Abstract

Summary

Places are extremely personal, embodied, lived experiences. The process of making sense of them includes intrigue events in one’s life history - events that bring about different needs that one expects the places to fulfill. Subsequently places have several levels of significance and agency during one’s life. The way places are perceived is a direct reflection on these factors – places go through different phases in our lives.

In June 2016, the result of the Brexit referendum greatly affected a number of European Union nationals living in the United Kingdom. The result brought on a new era of confusion and a forced need to renegotiate one’s status and rights to a place that had, up until then, provided the individuals with a relatively unquestioned freedom of mobility and residence within the British Isles. In this paper, I discuss the reactions of some of the Finnish expatriates in the UK.

I started my investigation into the UK-resident Finns’ initial reactions to the Brexit result during the first week after the referendum by exploring discourses that emerged about self, power and place in social media. Then, the emphasis was clearly on confusion, uncertainty and disbelief; but also on resistance and common sense. I now revisit the topic by finding out if or how the main discourses have been re-shaped a year later, and steer my focus deeper on the agency of place in having to re-negotiate the relationship between self and place.

Firstly, I discuss the self-place relationship as an embodied understanding which develops through sensory environments, interactions, material culture and vernaculars in one’s surroundings – they shape one’s attitudes towards different phenomena and social structures.

Secondly, I focus on the disruption to the Finns’ self-place relationship caused by the Brexit result, and discuss the discourses about power and place that emerge in discussions among UK-based Finns in social media discussion forums.

I conclude by discussing how these Finns, who have already been through several phases in their self-place relationship, are now faced by a shift from being social bodies, who have built a somewhat organised idea of the UK as a place that corresponds to their personal needs and ideas, to political bodies who, all of a sudden, seem to be forced to justify their existence in their familiar surroundings and are having to embody the power of place around them.

*Speaker

†Corresponding author: evi.riikonen@gmail.com

Keywords: Place, Embodiment, Brexit, Power, Discourse