Claire Earnshaw

Groups and Identities in 21st-Century British Fiction

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), often labelled a Brexit novel, revolves around the aftermath of the 2016 European membership referendum, in which the narrow majority of voters voted for Britain to leave the EU. Coe's novel highlights the political dimension of this decision by portraying its effects on the every-day life of his protagonists. In *Middle England*, the positions of 'leave' and 'remain' are no longer merely an expression of political differences; rather they evoke (or lay bare) growing chasms between two camps that affect all areas of life. One couple, for example, seeks marriage counselling on discovering that they can no longer find a way of living together due to their different opinions on whether Britain should remain in or leave the EU. When the counsellor asks why this difference aggravates them so much, Sophie answers that Ian voting 'leave' made her believe that "as a person, he's not as open as I thought he was" (Coe, *Middle England* 2018: 327), whereas Ian states that Sophie's wish to remain makes him think "that she's very naïve, that she lives in a bubble" (ibid.). Here, political opinions have been turned into markers of identity – "remainer" or "brexiteer" not just describes an opinion on politics, but by belonging to either of these groups people are ascribed a set of values, behaviours and attitudes.

The discussion between Ian and Sophie is one example of the effect group memberships can have on aspects of an individual's identity and how this in turn affects their every-day life. A closer look at novels published in the 2000s and beyond reveals that *Middle England* is no exception: In fact, there is a plethora of novels that explore current socio-political and cultural issues by depicting groups and their impacts on the protagonists' identity. In their handbook on *The British Novel in the Twenty-First Century*, Vera and Ansgar Nünning name climate change, generational conflicts, the rise of right-wing parties across Europe and the growing power and impact of social media (cf. 2018: 6) as some of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century and as of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic must certainly be added to this list. Examining the controversies surrounding these topics more closely, it soon becomes clear that all these issues are closely related to questions of how different and oftentimes conflicting group interests, hierarchies and identities can be fruitfully negotiated.

Seen from this perspective, writing a book on groups on 21st-century fiction appears less of a venturous project than first considerations may suggest. After all, theories on individualisation have continually emphasised that we live in an age in which the individual has emancipated itself (and been emancipated) from pre-determined social systems, obligations or roles (e.g. Beck 1986; Münch 1991). In consequence, group memberships appear to have become less frequent, more superficial and less influential (cf. Münch 1991: 31). There is no doubt that many of these tendencies have a kernel of truth in that "[p]eople no longer belong to a single dominant collective or social group which for a lifetime affects all or most aspects of their lives ('from the cradle to the grave')" (Simon 2004: 61); however, as many scholars have noted, the conclusions drawn need to be carefully scrutinised: "[i]t would be premature to assume that collective identity has simply been rendered obsolete in the modern or postmodern world" (ibid.: 64). Groups have thus not simply disappeared; the current socio-cultural context has merely altered their shape and concealed their significance:

> Granted, the meaning, value, and affective impact of […] connection is obscured by the liquefaction of social relations in late capitalism […] but the need for a worthwhile and profound set of relationships with others is not diminished. (Lea 2017: 21)

The contention that groups are still of pivotal importance in the 21st century is further backed by the fact that groups have become an increasingly important topic in public discourse. In recent years, several large media houses have addressed the oftentimes divisive effects of group memberships and initiated campaigns to encourage opposing camps to re-engage with the other's viewpoint. In Germany, the campaign "Deutschland spricht" that was launched by important platforms such as *dpa*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Tagesschau* provides a platform to connect people with opposing political opinions in real life – hoping that these real-life encounters may foster conversations and empathy and even tease out similarities that would remain hidden in the filter bubbles of the internet. The format has proven so successful that it has been adopted in different countries with slightly different set-ups: *The Guardian*'s series "Dining Across the Divide" invites people with contrary opinions on divisive issues out for dinner; the questionnaire that matches the people includes questions such as "should we wear masks for the foreseeable future" or "should British sportspeople take the knee" (2021: n.p.). These formats (and there are many