

Belonging

Concept: Belonging

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Description Belonging can be defined as the notion of being part of a community of individuals or of making something (particularly a place) one's own. Such a notion, although an abstract one, can be a weighty one with concrete ramifications. It evokes several questions: What are those core elements that are intimately linked to the idea or action of belonging? Does one experience belonging because of cultural ties, political ties, or because of social, religious, or economic ones? Or is it an interesting combination of all these elements that accounts for belonging?

Belonging can also be said to be primarily linked with the notion of the affective — that is, those emotions that connect us to various people, places, and ideas. This implies that belonging can be understood by taking into consideration the emotional links that underpin such an abstract notion. One feels one belongs to a certain community because one is emotionally connected to it. In this light, the processes related to changing borders and political communities become invested with a particular relevance. Although physical borders inscribe material boundaries between states and peoples, it is their affective character that speaks of the contradictions of belonging. With the intensification of globalization processes, and concomitant political implications (such as changing borders), the senses of belonging that pertain to individuals and groups are profoundly impacted. The relationship between loyalty, sentiment, and place needs to be constantly contextualized and understood in its profound contingent and historical character. While the nation-state as a form of political community is only a fairly recent one, with its artificially constructed borders, such borders constitute cultural practices as much as they are constituted by the cultural practices they enclose.



(Photo: Claire Thompson, IDRC-CRDI)

Within the context of today's flows of transnational migration, belonging becomes a particularly salient issue, invested with political implications. People who have left their country tend to organize themselves around that particular core element — nationality or ethnicity — in order to recapture their feelings of belonging. For example, Chinese immigrants might build a cultural centre or find living quarters near shops that sell Chinese produce and goods. However, the question of identification to the "homeland" is a complex one. Such an issue is not specific to migrants and refugees, but it is a question with which increasing numbers of individuals and/or collectivities must grapple, as various forms of political organization, other than the nation-state, acquire significance for their lives. For example, with the arrival on the political scene of the European Union, and its controversial processes of integration and expansion, the questions of belonging, loyalty, and placeness become increasingly salient. Can such an identity as transnational citizenship be developed and assumed? Is it not that the very idea of citizenship implicitly (and quite exclusively) relates identity and loyalty to a particular place and space, thereby excluding those other layers of identification that exceed pre-set spatial and cultural borders, such as issues of gender, sexuality, and class?

In the light of transnational migration flows, the issue of nationalism becomes an acutely controversial one. There are heated debates that attempt to answer the question of whether nationalism is still relevant in an age when globalization processes are intensifying. Is nationality and ethnicity an important factor to the idea or action of belonging? Has it ever been? With the end of the Cold War, it seemed that such factors had lost

some relevance, but the genocides that took place in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Congo, and recently the Sudan, have brought new importance to factors such as nationality and ethnicity. There seems to be a great intellectual divide between claims for a continued and strengthened relevance of nationalism and ethnicity, and those that argue that nationalism and ethnicity are no longer relevant. The latter voices prescribe that we ought to transcend our loyalty to nation/ethnicity, since such an exclusionary adherence tends to discriminate between those included in the national community and those outside of it, with the most devastating consequences.

While scholars from the first camp tend to view the nation-state as an ahistorical and natural(ized) form of political organization, those from the second camp tend to easily overlook the inescapable materiality of the nation-state and the ways in which this particular form of organization impacts our lives. For example, historical legacies associated with the nation-state have come to have an important bearing on individual and collective senses of belonging. Various national structures, such as mass education and the mass-media, construct identities of individuals as citizens belonging to a certain space. Such identities become internalized and naturalized, although they are also subject to contestation. However, one should not easily claim that one's primary identity is necessarily a national identity. To put it more straightforwardly, this implies that one's idea and sense of belonging to a nation comes not so much from an identification with the whole nation at once, rather from an identification to that immediate community to which one belongs. There seems to be a sense of immediacy associated with belonging, in as much as one more easily identifies oneself with immediate spaces, events, and people.

The ideal of the nation-state as the perfect congruence between a clearly-cut and uncontested territory and a homogeneous nation reveals its highly illusory character with the intensification of globalization processes. The idea and practice of the nation-state includes many contradictions and paradoxes, such as the existence of ethnic communities within its borders that relate to the nation-state in a richly contradictory manner. With the simultaneity of globalization and regionalization processes, certain communities make claims to autonomy, either by their desire to be separated from the nation-state(s) to which they were previously subordinated (as in the case of Quebec, Palestine, the Kurds), or through their claims to recognition and equal rights (without such claims being accompanied by desires of separation), such as in the cases of gay communities, various ethnic communities, various groups of workers, or certain Indigenous communities.

Although national borders become ever more porous and are permeated by transnational flows of trade, labour, and ideas (although still perversely resistant to free flows of people), the notion of belonging acquires deeper and various meanings. One can speak of multiple belongings, as in the case of migrants and refugees. But the idea of multiple belongings is no

longer the lot of those who have left their homes. Rather, it can safely be attributed to large categories of people. While being members of particular nations, people find themselves, at the same time, emotionally tied to various communities through race, gender, sexuality, religion, economic position (such as class), or political orientation. For example, one can identify oneself at the same time as Russian, woman, Eastern European, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian Orthodox, liberal. Such elements, in their simultaneous occurrence, speak of the individual's belonging to many communities, and possessing different degrees of loyalty to these communities.

While senses of belonging and identification have become more diffuse and more layered, there seems to be a paradoxical relationship between belonging and autonomy, when viewed through the prism of globalization processes. With greater transnational flows of trade, labour, and ideas, some individuals and/or groups have successfully claimed autonomy for themselves, as in the cases of certain categories of women in Western and non-Western countries (mostly educated individuals with access to the high-skill labour market). However, for Mexican men and women working in export processing zones of transnational corporations in uncertain and miserable conditions, or for certain Indigenous groups whose very existence is threatened, the idea of autonomy becomes an everyday challenge and struggle. As such, it is very much the case that one person's idea of belonging and autonomy cuts across many of globalization's tensions and contradictions, thus exposing one of its many "human consequences," as the philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman would have put it.

Suggested
Reading:

Balibar, Étienne. 2004. *We, the people of Europe? Reflections on transnational citizenship*. Trans. James Swenson, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998. *Globalization: The human consequences*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Berdahl, Daphne. 1999. *Where the world ended. Re-unification and identity in the German borderland*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. 2001. *The unknown errors of our lives*. New York: Anchor Books.