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“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul.”

S

o wrote Simone Weil in *The Need for Roots* (*L'Enracinement* in the original French) (1, p. 43). In this book,

she sets out, firstly, a subjective/objective contrast between rights and obligations, and argues that obligations are the more fundamental concept, on the grounds that these obligations stem from satisfying the vital needs of every human being. After outlining a list of such needs, Weil secondly identifies the need for roots, as quoted above, as the most important and least recognized need, and then analyzes how people in both towns and countryside have been “uprooted,” and deprived of this essential need. Finally, Weil tries to identify the means by which people and society can be “inspired,” have their roots restored, and their souls’ needs met.

Weil wrote this book in 1943, and her principle concerns were twofold: firstly, diagnosing the causes of French collapse (in particular, but Europe in general) in the early part of the Second World War; and secondly, recommendations for reconstructing or re-inspiring a nation after the war. In diagnosis, she was aghast at how the simplistic substitution of propaganda for both truth

and meaning, and the supposed march of material “progress,” had instilled a deep uprootedness at the core of individuals, and communities, societies, and nations. For re-inspiration, she proposed to re-establish roots.

Although she was writing at a time and under conditions very different from now (late 2020), suppose that we accept her basic premise that the possession of roots is the most important need of

the human soul. Then it is instructive to hold her book up as a mirror to contemporary society, to interpret what she wrote with respect to the forces and conditions that currently obtain, and to determine the extent to which it is applicable and relevant, both in understanding how technology might be contributing to uprootedness, and how technology could be used for the restoration of roots. Such a brief exegesis is the aim of this article.

No More “De-Root and Rule”

The Need for Digital Roots



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The Needs of the Soul

In the first part of *L'Enracinement*, Weil starts out by asserting that rights are subordinate and relative to obligations, and that from a subjective point of view, the individual only has duties (obligations), to others and to oneself, while those others appear to have rights. However, that individual has rights, when seen

that duty and privilege were opposites: that if x has a privilege over y with respect to F then x does not have a duty to y to refrain from F .

We note that Hohfeld's work was itself the starting point for Sergot's computational theory of normative positions (3), specifying a logical and computational representation of software agents' obligations, permissions, duties, and rights, and on that basis other complex normative relations such as entitlement, authorization, and responsibility. In the formal specification of agent societies (4), the fundamental "building blocks" were concepts of permission, obligation, and institutionalized power (5), and these were used to specify more complex normative relations. For example, in a formal specification of voting, the concept of *enfranchisement* can be broken down into a right and an entitlement; the entitlement can be further broken down into two obligations: one an obligation to count the vote correctly, and the other an obligation to declare the result correctly (i.e., according to the standing rules) (6).

Therefore, we can perhaps accept Weil's starting premise of obligations as fundamental concepts,¹ based on which we can also reasonably accept her assertion that "obligations ... all stem, without exception, from the vital needs of the human being" (1, p. 7). She proceeds to give a list of these needs:

order, liberty, obedience, responsibility, equality, hierarchism, honor, punishment, security, risk, private property, collective property, freedom of opinion, and truth. These needs themselves can be thought of as seven contrasting, but not contradictory, pairs: i.e., they are more like yin and yang, there is a need to have both and they need to be in balance. Although these needs focus more on the spiritual rather than the physical, emotional, or material essence of being, it is possible to find them rather more convincing than, for example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (7).

While Maslow put self-actualization (the full achievement of personal potential) at the apex of his pyramid, for Weil, the final solo need, and, as quoted above, the most important but least definable, was (figuratively speaking) at the base: the need for roots. This is quite the opposite of Maslow, rather than the exhibition of the self through self-fulfilment, for Weil it is the immersion of the self in the environment that is most important.

Thus Weil asserted that a human being "grows" roots through active and purposeful participation in the life of a community, and has a multiplicity of such roots through associations with place, kinship, education, civic engagement, and professional activities.

These communal associations have both a common memory of the past and common expectations of the future (and it could be added, perhaps, a shared set of congruent values (8)), and provide moral, intellectual and spiritual well-being (like a plant's roots provide anchorage, storage and absorption). A similarity can be drawn here with the bonding and bridging social capital of Putnam (9).

However, like Putnam, who charted a decline of social capital in

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from the perspective of the others, who (from their own perspective) each have duties.

This assertion is more or less consistent with Hohfeld's original work (2) on "fundamental legal conceptions," which posited that "right" and "duty" were correlatives, in the sense that if x has a right (claim) against y that F (be done by y), then y has a duty to x that F (be done by y); and



Simone Weil, 1922.

¹In reference to Weil's historical and theological commentaries, the poet T. S. Eliot, who wrote the foreword to the English translation of *L'Enracinement*, said that "I do not know how good a Greek scholar she was. I do not know how well read she was in the history of the civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean" (1, p.xi). Equally, I have no idea how well versed she was in legal or logical scholarship. All the same her intuition seems sound enough to take the inferences that she draws on merit.

1980s and 1990s America through the decline in civic participation, Weil was dismayed by the social, spiritual, and cultural malaise afflicting 1920s and 1930s France in particular, but also Western “civilization” in general. This she attributed to the false values of materialism, consumerism, and populism, which were the consequence of *uprootedness*. The causes of uprootedness were the subject of analysis in the second part of *L’Enracinement*.

Uprootedness

Weil defined uprootedness as a condition (in the sense of an illness) associated with the destruction of ties with the past, the dashing of expectations for the future, and the dissolution of communities. She identified four causes of uprootedness: military conquest, economic domination, money fixation, and the means of education.² Each of these will be examined in turn, in relation to both when it was written, and its contemporary relevance.

“When the conqueror remains a stranger in the land of which he has taken possession, uprootedness becomes an almost mortal disease among the subdued population” (1, p. 44).

Weil was writing, presumably, with the 1940s Nazi conquest of Western Europe in mind; but in modern times it has not been military conquest *per se* that has been the cause of uprootedness, but the notion of neo-colonialism (10). This has resulted in political authorities that are *in* a country and ruling it, but not *of* it, which seemingly care

not for the country, environmentally speaking, seeing it only as an asset to strip and an opportunity to extract wealth; and nor for its people, seeing them as nothing more than a commodifiable and expendable revenue stream. Hence it can be seen the hollowing out of venerable political parties, which are reflat by what are effectively personality cults, devoted to the vanity, obsessions, and narcissism of a single man (and so far it has always been a man). Moreover, these are also the countries that are rolling back environmental protections, and have the highest Covid-19 fatalities as a percentage of population (despite the potential benefits of well above-average GDP).

“It (uprootedness as a consequence of military conquest) reaches its most acute stage when there are deportations on a massive scale” (1, p. 44).

Again, in modern times, there is nothing so coarse and obvious as deportations, but in the U.K. the corollaries of Brexit and a “hostile immigration policy” have been an increase in re-location of U.K. citizens, and return of other EU citizens, to mainland Europe,³ of primarily skilled, educated and economically productive people (11), and a corresponding unwillingness of EU citizens to re-locate to the U.K., with the result that there are significant labor shortages in the health, manufacturing, service, and agriculture sectors (12).

“Even without a military conquest, money-power and economic domination can so impose a foreign influence as actually to impose this disease of uprootedness” (1, p. 44).

We have argued this point in these pages before, in the monetization of social capital (13), the private ownership of the means of social coordination (14), and the manifestation of techno-feudalism (15); and the theme is further explored by Goodell (16). But what is new here is seeing how all of these trends are the product of transnational corporations exerting economic domination over a nation that its government is somewhere between “too weak” and “shamelessly collusive” to prevent; and how all are contributing to twenty-first century uprootedness.

“The social relations existing in any one country can be very dangerous factors in connexion with uprootedness. ... One of them is money. Money destroys human roots ... by turning the desire for gain into the sole motive” (1, p. 44).

Fast-forwarding eighty years: the consequence of the digital monetization of socially-constructed values (17) is that everything is put up for sale. There are two concerns with this, as analyzed in (18): inequality and corruption. Widening inequality would not matter quite so much if it were only luxuries that were inaccessible, but once all goods and services of value are for sale, and necessities are only accessible to those with affluence, then social inequality becomes a cause of social instability. The issue of corruption affects not just the trade in those goods and services, but also the values themselves: as Weil herself puts it “*nothing is so clear and so simple as a row of figures*” (1, p. 44); uprootedness occurs in part when the pursuit of those figures is a primary social driver; when social status is afforded only to those few who have the largest figures; and when for many,

²Before her time, but Weil might now include “massification,” both as the imposition of the uniformity of thought through mass media, and the uniformity of thought that is produced by, say, insufficiently-resourced mass higher education.

³This might be called the “Brexitodus.”

the row of figures are all zeroes. In other words, unchecked inequality is a major cause of the uprootedness that produces increased social instability.

"For the second factor (in social relations) making for uprootedness is education as it is understood nowadays. ... Moreover



How might technology be contributing to uprootedness?

the desire to learn for the sake of learning, the desire for truth, has become very rare. ... The youth of our schools are as much obsessed by their examinations ..." (1, p. 45–47).

Plus ça change, as Weil might wryly observe, if she could see the U.K.'s current education system, in which: creativity is suppressed; meaningful learning is subordinate to meaningless performance metrics (cf., (19)); high-stakes testing and selection exacerbate inequality of both opportunity and outcome; competitive testing combined with peer and metric pressure exacerbate mental health and other well-being problems (20); and the right to self-organize to accommodate local conditions is not recognized. These problems persist even unto tertiary education: rather than an opportunity for self-determination (21), a significant proportion of university undergraduates seem to think that the "learning game" involves the professors being in possession of marks, and the student's "role" in the game is to acquire their share of those marks. Marks for which they erroneously think that

they have already paid in the form of their fees,⁴ fueling first a sense of entitlement; and subsequently a sense of disillusion, when the scale of their debt, and the future expectation of indentured servitude, becomes manifest (15): this sense destroys roots.

In the U.K., the continual right-wing denigration of teachers, and teaching as a respectful and respectable profession, does not help. Weil also wrote *"if a peasant tills the soil with the feeling that if he is a peasant, it is because he wasn't intelligent enough to become a teacher"* (1, p. 47). Here,

Weil was criticizing a social system in which cultural prestige, intellectual prowess, or examination success for its own sake is as much overvalued as agricultural labor, say, is undervalued. However, with the rejection of knowledge for its own sake as a value (indeed the inversion of knowledge as "elitist" rather than admirable), and the perverse desire to remain in wilful ignorance (22), combined with the deprecation of education and the educated, now perhaps she might write *"if someone works on a zero hours contract for minimum wage, no statutory sickness pay, no holiday pay, and no union, he thinks to himself 'at least he wasn't dumb enough to become a teacher'."*

The Growing of Roots

"Uprootedness is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed, for it is a self-propagating one. For people who are really uprooted there remain only two possible sorts of pos-

sible behaviour: either to fall into a spiritual lethargy resembling death ... or to hurl themselves into some form of activity necessarily designed to uproot, often by the most violent methods, those who are not yet uprooted" (1, p. 47).

This disturbingly prescient passage quite distinctly characterizes some of the less savory aspects of on-line social media: in particular activities of those already uprooted, often threatening violence, in order to uproot those that are not; hence the self-propagation. This process reached its nadir in the U.K. in relation to the referendum on EU membership (Brexit). There were two defining characteristics of this pitiful saga. The first characteristic is that it was those who voted in favor of "leave" were generally those most adversely affected by the preceding years of cruel and needless austerity that followed the financial crash in 2008–2009; those most backward-looking but who had benefitted most from EU membership; and those most disadvantaged regions that had benefitted most from EU inward investment.⁵ While the data is complex and still open to interpretation, voting "leave" appears to be systematically correlated with older age, lower educational attainment, unemployment or under-employment, a lack of quality of public service provision, white ethnicity with intolerance of "foreigners," infrequent use of smartphones and the Internet, receiving benefits, adverse health, and lower life satisfaction (23).

⁵The Germans have a word for this: *schadenfreudeschleppenscheisse*.⁶

⁶They don't, of course; I made it up. But there should be such a word. Loosely translated it would mean "miserable company"; literally it would mean "one man's pleasure at the discomfort of others caused by dragging them into the same sh*t that he is in."

⁴It is possible to agitate for a market in higher education and then whine about grade inflation, if one does not mind people making inferences about skipping logic class.

The second characteristic was that the debate preceding the vote and in dealing with its aftermath was marked by not just by a lack of civility and wilful misinformation, but it was further fueled by a polarized rage, hatred, and vitriol which frequently manifested itself as threats of violence, a licensing of anti-immigrant hostility, and *in extremis*, the political assassination of Labour MP Jo Cox. One interpretation, then, of the Brexit vote and the attitudes it unleashed is that it was a displacement activity that gave free rein to expressions of violence by those who were already uprooted by financial, educational, cultural, regional, technological and, rather than immigration, *neo-colonial* exclusion; and specifically targeted at those who were perceived to have roots, and in particular those with multiple root systems who saw themselves as European as much as British.

Weil wrote:

"four obstacles above all separate us from a form of civilisation likely to be worth something: our false conception of greatness; the degradation of the sentiment of justice, our idolisation of money; and our lack of religious inspiration" (1, p. 216).

It would seem that this quartet is still with us, even eighty years later. The delusion of greatness, can be seen in the empty (but admittedly and depressingly effective in its appeal to the uprooted) sloganeering of "Make (Insert Country Here) Great Again," "Take Back Control," "Make (Insert Country Here) Great Again (Again)," "Get Brexit Done," and so on. In particular, the U.K. remains deluded by its contradictory twin myths of English exceptionalism and European victimization (24), while demonizing

every progressive or liberal idea as a fundamental threat to civilization: targeting minorities and scare-mongering (looking backwards) is the last refuge for those have no policy besides preserving their own position, power, and status, and the vested interests of the clique that they represent (rather than public or national interests). Without confronting these delusions, there can be no meaningful unifying national program of spiritual, political and cultural renewal.

For the sentiment of justice, this obstacle is being increasingly entrenched as supposedly democratic political regimes are usurped by those who arrogate power and control for themselves but exclude responsibility and accountability for their decisions; by those who have one conception of what, for example, "privacy," "law-abiding," and "tax-paying" means for themselves, and a completely different conception of these social concepts (and social obligations) for others. For the idolization of money, this obstacle too is being made higher by widening individual and regional inequality: while it is generally preferable to have some money and not need it, than need some money and not have it, it is also possible to make significant achievements relying solely on non-monetary conceptual resources (such as trust and social capital). On the issue of lack of religious inspiration, Weil made much of the spirituality in and of labor: there is little inspiration of any kind to be had in "McJobs" or other forms of meaningless work (25) in the absence of collectivization, profit-sharing, or other social incentivization that creates roots.

"We must keep well to the fore in any political, legal or techno-

logical innovations likely to have social repercussions, some arrangement whereby human beings may once more be able to recover their roots" (1, p. 52).

Beyond overcoming this same set of obstacles, the challenge is also, what can be done, with technology and by technologists, so that people feel rooted, culturally



How could technology be used for the restoration of roots?

and spiritually, to their environment and community, and have positive expectations for the future. We offer five recommendations here (there are surely more).

Firstly, it is essential to address the "digital divide." In the 2019 U.K. General Election, the Labour Party's manifesto proposal of universal Internet access through 5G broadband connectivity was derided as "crazed communism," but it is essential for citizens to participate fully (and to grow roots in) the "Digital Society."

Secondly, we need platforms to support local collective action. There are two possible phoenixes that may emerge from the Covid-19 crisis: one is the atavistic return of the pre-Covid "business as usual," but exacerbated by techno-feudalism or disaster capitalism (26). The other is that there is a general unwillingness for its return: people could see potential benefits from increased neighborhood cooperation, improved air quality, the need for climate action and environmental protection, increased taxation if that meant

better public service provision, and more concern for keyworkers and employment rights (27). Building on universal Internet access, open source platforms to support local collective action would be a key enabler of increased neighborhood cooperation.

Thirdly, these platforms, as well as encoding deep social knowledge for solving collective action problems, visualising “conceptual resources,” and contributions to, for example, UN achieving Sustainable Development Goals, could also help citizens visualize and nurture roots. Moreover, the “ecosystemic” nature of these interlinked platforms is important: as Weil wrote *“Reciprocal exchanges by which different sorts of environment exert influence on one another are no less vital than to be rooted in natural surroundings”* (1, p. 43).

The fourth is social: we simply need better education and more meaningful employment.

The fifth is political: “divide and rule” is a well-known political strategy as well as an efficient search algorithm. But in the populist pursuit of political authority, it seems to have been refined somewhat, into “de-root and rule.” It seems the populists have identified an effective power-grabbing strategy by de-rooting half the population, and then using mass press propaganda and social media filter bubbles to con that half into voting for people and policies that only aggravate uprootedness. In the long-run, there is little wisdom in this, because just like their industrial and environmental policies, it is simply unsustainable (for those of us who can see and care about the shadow of the future, anyway).

On that last point, we note, but without sadness, the following comment by T. S. Eliot in his Foreword to *L'Enracinement*:

“This book is in that category of prolegomena to politics which politicians seldom read, and which most of them would be unlikely to understand or to know how to apply” (1, p. xiv).

For post-pandemic renewal, we need politicians who have read, understand, and can apply Weil’s ideas, not populist would-be autocrats who can tick off moves from the authoritarian’s playbook.

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