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Brexit in Sunderland: The Production of Difference and Division in the UK Referendum on EU Membership

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Harry Bromley-Davenport graduated from the School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol with First Class Honours. His dissertation project used a case study of Sunderland to explore the motivating factors behind the Brexit vote amongst the cohort of men aged 50 years and above.

Julie MacLeavy is a Reader at the School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol. Her research interests lie in the field of economic geography, particularly in debates around welfare reform, labour markets and neoliberal policy reform in contexts of austerity. Recent work has focused on the gendered geographies of inequality and disadvantage in the post-Brexit period.

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Abstract

There is a growing narrative that the outcome of the UK referendum on European Union membership was the product of disenfranchisement and disillusionment wrought by the uneven consequences of economic restructuring in different UK regions, cities and communities. Those most likely to vote 'leave' were concentrated among those 'left behind' by globalisation, whilst those voting 'remain' were clustered within more affluent areas and social groups. These uneven geographies of leave and remain voting have been taken to reveal two diametrically opposed groups in British politics, obscuring the messy and contradictory ways in which votes are cast. In seeking to bring these complexities to light, this paper explores the motivating factors behind the Brexit vote amongst older working-class white men in Sunderland, England. The paper shows how economic stagnation and the experience of different forms of marginality led to a nostalgia for times past and a mistrust of political elites amongst this cohort. The paper documents how the feelings expressed by research participants became linked to the EU project and its real and perceived impacts on the local area. In doing so, it shows that the referendum shaped and changed the electorate by asking them to align themselves with those either for or against Britain's membership of the EU. The paper concludes by reflecting on the possibilities for creating an inclusive form of politics that treats different responses to the referendum question as the basis for an open conversation about democracy and democratic ideals.

Keywords: Brexit, Difference; Division; Gender; Regional Inequality, Sunderland, UK

Supplementary materials: The data that support the findings of this paper are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request

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Introduction

Against a backdrop of austerity, rising inequality and in-work poverty, the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership is widely seen to have laid bare the political and economic imbalance within the country. Five years after the Occupy Movement of 2011, a middle class urban protest that brought the widening gap between rich and poor to the public conscious, the 'Brexit' vote (as the referendum has become known) served to illustrate the geography of polarisation within the UK (Clarke et al., 2017). While London, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain, the rest of the country voted to leave the EU, with the vote for Brexit strongest in the band of areas that run down the east of England, taking in parts of Lincolnshire, Essex and the East Midlands (Short, 2016). These are areas where economic and political restructuring over the past 40 years has served to marginalise industrial declining and disadvantaged rural areas. In particular, the Brexit vote cemented the division between voters residing in London and the prosperous cities of Edinburgh, Cambridge, Oxford, Brighton, Glasgow, St Albans, Bristol, Aberdeen and Manchester (all of which voted to remain in the EU) and those living in small towns and the countryside (where the majority votes to leave were recorded). David Goodhart's (2017) controversial analysis of the vote seeks explanation through a schism between the 'anywheres', those footloose, often urban members of the electorate that he identifies as socially liberal and university educated, and the 'somewheres', who he says remain rooted in a specific place or community where social conservatism and low education levels are the norm (see also Grey (2016) who distinguishes between the voting preferences of what Gouldner (1958) terms 'cosmopolitans' and 'locals' in the EU referendum). Goodhart posits that the vote for Brexit was a product of the growing discontent amongst the 'somewheres' with the globalised world they see around them. Others, however, have challenged the depiction of 'vote leavers' as the left behind – educationally and financially – noting that the leave vote is far from the expression of a singular and conscious working class (Antonucci et al., 2017). Moreover, social malaise affects ample sections of the population including those who have intermediate or upper-intermediate levels of education, stable jobs and median levels of income, but nonetheless face increasing difficulties in maintaining the lifestyles to which they have become accustomed and desire (MacLeavy and Manley, 2018).

It is also posited that rather than revealing a divided nation that already existed, the referendum produced division by asking people to vote one of two ways (Elliot, 2017). The superficial

appearance of a clear geography to the pattern of votes is the result of the referendum fundamentally shaping and changing UK society through the construction of a binary opposition between ‘leavers’ and ‘remainers’. People were encouraged to identify with one ‘side’ or another, even if they had not previously considered their own views on the EU project or were ambivalent towards it. Given that each voter casts their ballot as an individual, the referendum was productive at the level of the individual, as well as the aggregate. It shaped individual identities and preferences, as much as the political and social world those individuals inhabit. This argument challenges the trope of a pre-existing chasm by suggesting that voting produces divisions and identities rather than just measuring them.

Goodhart’s (2017) thesis that the outcome of the EU referendum vote was the product of disenfranchisement and disillusionment is useful in highlighting the extent to which the increased openness of economics, culture and society is in tension with the remaining localised experience of everyday life. However, although initially compelling careful interrogation reveals that it does not provide insight into *why* the vote in the provincial towns and regions of England gave a small majority to the leave campaign. In other words, why membership of the European Union was perceived as the problem rather than the solution to the negative consequences of globalisation and the failure of the neoliberal state to ensure an equitable distribution of income and wealth, or why EU membership was seen as antithetical to effective political representation. Given that Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU the electoral picture is evidently more complex than the anywhere/somewhere heuristic conveys when mapped onto England alone. This is clear when we consider the issue of national sovereignty, which has been cited as a motivating factor behind the vote for Brexit amongst the ‘somewheres’ of England (Glencross, 2016; Morgan, 2016). Press commentaries in the wake of the EU referendum have pointed towards a sizeable proportion of the population that feel they have no voice, no representation, and a mistrust of meta-government. As such, they are willing to believe unsubstantiated claims about the benefits of the UK leaving Europe, most notably the Leave campaign’s bus message that the UK government would be able to allocate an additional £350 million per week to NHS post-Brexit (Travis, 2016). For them, the vote for Brexit is a vote for self-determination; a means to bolster the authority of the British state to govern itself. Yet for the ‘somewheres’ of the Northern Isles of Scotland – where even the Scottish parliament may be perceived as a remote outside body of government – we see instead a vote to remain in the EU in a move that is coherent with the ‘no’ vote of the 2014 referendum for Scottish independence. In these parts, all options are distant and as such there is no impetus to alter the status quo.

The EU referendum results thus reveal differing responses to processes of marginalisation amongst the ‘somewheres’. While Westminster elite could be painted as of equal distance to the residents of strongly pro-Brexit towns in the East of England as they are perceived to be by those living in the Orkney and Shetland Islands, there is a clear disjuncture in how the longstanding social and economic divide, and the insecurities and alienation with which it is associated, has permeated local political culture. Whilst it may have produced ‘empire-lamenting nationalists’ (Grey, 2016: 830) in the peripheral English regions, those in the Northern Isles of Scotland continue to subscribe to a multidimensional notion of sovereignty. This suggests a need to unpack the productive effects of everyday practices such as voting to reveal how people’s identities and political preferences are shaped. Specifically, how did the referendum change voter’s pre-existing preferences and sort them into two groups that did not exist before?

Focusing on a group of ‘somewheres’, this paper explores the motivating factors behind the vote for Brexit. In particular, it engages with the process through which these voters arrived at the decision to vote leave or remain, what they believed about the EU project and what voting in the referendum meant for them in terms of their identity and future relations with others. The voters recruited were working-class constituents from Sunderland in the North East of England. All were white men aged 50 and over with a history of work in routine and semi-routine jobs in city. This cohort is seen as emblematic of the vote leavers as a result of Lord Ashcroft’s survey, which suggested voters of this demographic were much more likely to vote leave than remain (Ashcroft and Culwick, 2016), as well as geographical analysis prior to the referendum which predicted a large majority vote for Britain to leave the EU amongst Sunderland’s older generation (Manley et al., 2016). The decision to focus on older working class white men instead of/not in addition to women was made on the basis of evidence of gender-differentiated voting patterns and behaviours as shown by analysis of the British Election Study whereby older males with few educational qualifications were the most likely to vote leave (see Johnston et al., forthcoming). Economically independent women were more likely to vote remain, whilst those dependent on a male partner tended to vote in line with his political preferences (Zucherman, 2017). While men tend to vote independently, women’s votes are not always an independent variable and may simply embody the needs and expectations of their partners (Strøm, 2012).

In November 2016, twenty-five interviews were conducted alongside two focus groups. The first focus group had seven participants, the second focus group had three providing for a more detailed

discussion of the reasons why representatives from this group of voters decided to vote leave or remain. In sum, then, thirty-five men were given the opportunity to reflect on the social and economic politics of the Brexit vote, with additional data sought to provide a contextualised understanding of each participant's position on Britain and the EU, including their employment status and history. The interviews and focus groups were used to unpack the messy and contradictory reasons participants had for voting as they did and the strength of feeling that accompanied their votes. Whilst there is a growing body of statistical analyses of the 2016 EU referendum vote, including several studies that consider the anywhere/somewhere distinction (e.g. Becker et al, 2016; Harris and Charlton, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Manley et al., 2016; and Swales, 2016), there is a relative paucity of qualitative data that allows us to explore factors shaping the political positions of constituents. The quantification of votes for leave and remain can provide insight into the behaviour of the population but such analysis cannot provide insight into the individual complexities which underpin those votes (Elliot, 2017). This paper seeks to address this lacuna by providing a detailed insight into the stimuli influencing votes amongst this key cohort.

The paper is structured as follows: First, Sunderland is introduced as the totemic city of Brexit, as both the first place to announce and somewhere where the overall result – a vote to leave – was indicative of the (previously unexpected) level of support for the leave campaign at a national level. In introducing our case study, we provide a methodological overview and outline the key narratives from the interviews and focus groups that were conducted. In the next section of paper, we outline how our data suggest that the referendum result was the outcome of a nation-building project in which white working-class identities were reconstructed as the referendum campaign encouraged voters to connect the experience of economic inequality with issues of race and migration, as opposed to neoliberal modernisation and the implementation of austerity measures (Jackson, 2016; see also Haylett, 2001). Then, we explore the gender politics of the referendum debate and the extent to which different groups were incorporated and excluded in the imagination of British citizenship by the Leave campaign. This latter section of the paper reflects on the binary construction of 'leavers' and 'remainers' and what these labels means in terms of future political debate. With opinions on the EU creating two kinds of voter, the possibilities for creating a more inclusive form of class politics that links growing economic inequality back to its origins in neoliberal ideology and policies are open to question (Clarke and Newman, 2017; Emejulu, 2016; see also Gilroy, 2005).

The iconic city: Sunderland as symbol of political-economic disconnect

Sunderland was the city that announced Brexit to the world in the early hours of 24 June 2016 with 61% of the referendum vote in favour of Britain leaving the EU. The success of the Leave campaign in this Labour heartland was far greater than any pollster had predicted and there followed a huge drop in the value of sterling on the currency markets as it became clear that the result in Sunderland was indicative of the majority support for Brexit in the UK. Soon labelled ‘the city that crashed the pound’ (Geoghegan, 2016: n.p.), Sunderland became the focus of a number of media reports that sought to uncover why the UK had become so Eurosceptic (e.g. De Freytas-Tamura, 2016; Islam, 2016). Of particular interest was the reasons why residents of this city had on the face of it ‘voted against their own interests’ (De Freytas-Tamura, 2016). Sunderland had long been reliant on shifts in the global economy, from the demise of the shipyards and pits that had once provided lifelong employment and job certainty in the North East region, Sunderland to the more recent inward investments for its manufacturing base. It is home to more than 80 foreign-owned companies employing 25,600 people from cities across the region (Newcastle, Durham, Hartlepool, even Middlesbrough). For instance, the Nissan car plant provides over 7,000 jobs with a further 32,000 in its supply chain. Buttressed by European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), which provide financial support for the North East Strategic Economic Plan (that seeks to improve employment opportunities in the region through investment in business infrastructure and skills development), manufacturing companies have located in the city to benefit from the strategic investments as well as tariff-free export from the UK to the rest of Europe. Indeed, Nissan – one of the North East’s largest employers – made the importance of Britain’s position in the EU clear in the run up to the referendum, leading to uncertainty around the future location of the company and continuation of employment in Sunderland should a vote to leave be returned.

Yet despite such threats, the people of Sunderland celebrated the Leave campaign victory in the early hours of the morning. The high level of support for Brexit in Sunderland and other ‘somewhere’ parts of the UK has been widely attributed to the deep regional divide in UK economy and society, because of the manner in which support for Leave and Remain campaigns cut across lines of age, income, education and even party (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Certainly, the voting patterns belie attempts to provide a simple story of a vote driven by traditional class conflict and point instead towards the role of culture and geography in voter support for the EU (Elliot, 2017; Kaufman, 2016; see also Hacking’s (2009: 104) discussion of ‘kind-making’). At an aggregate level, analysis that suggests that the Brexit vote was delivered by the ‘left behind’, a *heterogeneous* grouping united by a general sense of insecurity, pessimism and marginalisation (Goodwin and Heath, 2016: 331, emphasis added). What is interesting, then, is how the EU referendum

intervened in different kinds of spatial and social histories produce leave or remain voters (Jackson, 2016). In the context of Sunderland, the outcome has been attributed to a disenfranchised majority voting in ‘protest’ to political and economic transformations that have denigrated and disadvantaged the three lower socio-economic groups (the C2DE group) (Sensier and Devine, 2017). De Freytas-Tamura (2016) posits that the referendum result in Sunderland is indicative of long-suppressed grievances amongst the Northern working-class in relation to economic restructuring, welfare reform and migration. Others note the role of the modernisation of the Labour Party instigated by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown that fuelled the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) by alienating Labour’s working-class base in a context where government discourse on welfare and the economy became increasingly removed from a Marshallian ideal of social inclusion (Gray, 2017; Clarke et al., 2017). The rise of UKIP demonstrated to a broader section of the population that it is still possible to vote in opposition to an excessive concentration of economic activity and actors in the large post-industrial cities of the South of England, as well as London’s progressive ‘decoupling’ from the UK economy, with the referendum serving as a tipping point.

With supply-led development interventions intended to help declining and lagging regions generally considered to have failed, cities like Sunderland have become increasingly dependent on transfers and welfare from central or European government. Despite massive public expenditure, Sunderland is one of many cities in the North and East of England that have experienced a ‘hollowing out’ of the labour market with a notable shift from manual but skilled work to unskilled jobs (Holmes and Mayhew, 2015). The existence of these permanently assisted and sheltered economies has resulted in moves to focus development policy on the largest and most successful agglomerations further reinforcing the historic North-South divide (McCann 2016; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Unsurprisingly perhaps, the experience of marginality has led to a perception that ‘change is loss’ in the former industrial cities and regions of the UK. Immigration is feared for its potential employment impact rather than celebrated for its economic and cultural contributions. Political transformations – the rise of the professional politician and the demise of the unions – are lamented for increasing the sense of distance between the local electorate and those in influential political roles.

Using a qualitative research approach comprised of semi-structured interviews and focus groups organised with the help of staff in four social clubs within the city and held mainly on their premises in backrooms or quiet areas of the bar, our research sought to uncover the experiences

that helped to shape the voting positions of constituents in Sunderland. Our particular focus was on working-class white men aged between 50 and 85 years of age, identified from Lord Ashcroft's survey of 12,369 referendum voters (the largest sample available) to be most likely to have voted to leave EU (Ashcroft and Culwick, 2016; a finding confirmed by Johnston et al., 2016; Johnston et al., forthcoming). As Gidron and Hall (2017) note, this cohort has experienced depressed income and job security in recent years, paving the way for the acceptance of a new cultural frame for interpreting society and their position within it. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method that started from the four social clubs and proceeded to enrol those in the demographic in the research. Of the 35 participants, just one identified himself as remain voter. A further two declined to say how they had voted, but the rest of the participants were open about their decision to vote leave. One of us (Bromley-Davenport) was responsible for the fieldwork and chose not to disclose how he had voted in the referendum in order to facilitate more open discussion with participants. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, then analysed using emic and etic codes, which were then collated across the transcripts for analysis (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). Previous research by MacLeavy on the gendered economic geography of Brexit and Manley on the impacts of inequality on election outcomes including the referendum influence the argument developed in the paper to some extent, though the new material gained in the course of the fieldwork provided a whole new perspective on elections as events that shape and change the societies in which they take place.

Three key themes were identified from the qualitative data: economic stagnation, marginalisation and mistrust. The first references problems of growing inequality and stalled social mobility, which became connected to the rejection of a post-national Europe through the promotion of a story of 'white victimhood' by the Leave campaign (Emejulu, 2016). The data particularly illuminate how the transformation of the job market into an hour glass shape through the 'hollowing out' of middle rank jobs has produced division whilst reducing financial security for a majority of workers (West and Nelson, 2013). Importantly whilst there have been new jobs created in Sunderland, the replacement of posts in the city's shipyards and mines by employment in its manufacturing plants has not been at the same level of skill. Indeed, there are relatively more low-skilled production jobs and fewer more-skilled roles in the city than there were a few decades ago and this has had an impact on the lifestyles of average earners. Against this background, the second and third themes of marginalisation and public mistrust denote the disenfranchisement of participants and the disbelief that the political economic system is doing something for 'ordinary' working-class men. Whilst it might appear from the outside that it is – for instance on account of the ESIF the city

has received – it was clear from our research the city’s transition from coal-mining and shipbuilding to export manufacturing has been far from smooth for its displaced workers. The core export businesses that the ESIF funding was used to attract were never intended solely for Sunderland and unemployment in the city persists as firms recruit from across the North East region.

Both the interview and focus group data make clear that there is a gulf between supporters of the Remain and Leave campaigns and this in part reflects the change in the volume and distribution of jobs in the last century. Technology and competition from abroad removed secure working-class jobs, just as the digital revolution is currently reducing the availability of secure, middle-class employment (reducing financial rewards for those in the middle and concentrating wealth at the very top – see MacLeavy and Manley, 2018). The outcome of this is a growing divide between those in employment that allows them to access a reasonably sized house, a decent education for their children and a reliable pension, and those with poorly paid and/or insecure employment posts that feel that have no control for the circumstances they now find themselves in. Importantly the polarisation of the jobs market has been accompanied by cultural and political changes that have contributed to the marginalisation or de-politicisation of the working-class experience of economic inequality. Once well-represented through the unions and the Labour Party prior to its modernisation, the working-class now suffer from a lack of voice, lack of representation, and non-inclusion in the elite-dominated institutions that decide things in and for the UK. Although the structural inequalities that deny the working-class access to opportunities, resources and power are not particular to our cohort, UKIP and the broader Leave campaign used the 2016 EU referendum to justify a *gendered politics of white self-interest* that galvanised a majority of those in Sunderland to vote Leave. We use this term in reference to the political views that took hold in the run up to the referendum, which prompted voters in declining areas to vote leave in opposition to a system that they perceived had quashed their labour market capabilities through the reconfiguration of the gender and race order. The deterioration in what had been the normative or standard employment relationship for white men was associated with EU policy supporting the growing diversity of the labour market.

Economic stagnation and the changing political landscape

Sunderland’s industrial past was a recurring theme in interviews and focus group discussions. Research participants often referenced the local and regional impacts of the Thatcherite ideology of privatisation, cuts and deregulation, which have guided governments under both Conservative and Labour leadership for the past 30 years. Although the Labour party had recently seen a change

in leadership with the election of Jeremy Corbyn in September 2015, his socialist democratic views had done little to change the perception that neoliberal policies have been accepted right across the mainstream of British politics: from the Thatcherites who still dominate the Conservative party, to the Labour party following its recreation under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, as well as the increasingly pro-business Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National party (Beckett, 2017). Hence the vote to Leave the EU was explained by research participants as a reaction to historical legacy of Margaret Thatcher. After all, it was Thatcher as the Leader of the Opposition Party that lent her support to the Yes campaign that ensured Britain stayed in the European Community in the 1975 referendum. For many interviewees and focus group participants the relationship of Britain to Europe was inextricably and adversely linked with the deleterious social and economic change that they had witnessed in Sunderland and the North East during and since her prime ministership:

What closed Sunderland down was the European Common Market...with the Common Market every country is given a job to do and it was Nissan in Sunderland.

Jeremy, 84, ex-docker

You could walk job to job, trade to trade, company to company, you could get a job off anybody. You'd never be out of work until Thatcher took over.

Peter, 76, ex-construction worker

The unresolved loss of Sunderland's collieries and shipyards is evident in what Gamble (2015: 3) terms the 'Thatcher myth' pronounced by the cohort under study. It identifies the extent to which constituents exaggerate the agency of individual political figures and downplay the contingency and structural contexts in which government policies are implemented. Jeff a 69-year-old welder told us that "she [Thatcher] killed everything in this town" and Tom a 72-year-old ex-miner reinforced this when he pointed towards the consequences of neoliberalism for "not just Sunderland, but the whole of the North East".

The construction of the Thatcher myth is importantly linked to broader attempts to naturalise the neoliberal project on a global scale (Jessop, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002). Thus, we heard accounts of the changing labour market conditions associated with the modern flexible economy underpinned by a distinctive moral construction of social and economic relations that participants had realised from contemporary political discourse on the welfare, economy and solidarity. In interviews and focus groups research participants connected the public debate around immigration

to issues of welfare entitlement and raised issues of fairness, worthiness and moral obligation when in receipt of financial support from the state. Indeed, it was not immigration per se that exercised the ‘vote leavers’ but rather the potential access of immigrants to welfare funds. As Chris a 66-year-old mechanic remarked, “If [EU migrants] actually come over and do some work, then that’s alright!”. And there was broad agreement that to “claim our benefits and not put anything back into the system” (Jeff, a 69-year-old welder) was unjust during the focus group discussion held in the Steels Social Club. Research participants said that they found it “ridiculous” that the UK did not operate a contribution-based welfare system with two participants giving very personal accounts to underpin their views. Frank a 57-year-old ex-miner, who has a neurological disorder, explained that his brain worked off a pacemaker in his chest and that he was currently living off just under £100 a week (£32.55 basic disability premium plus £62.45 severe disability premium), but was under threat of sanctions as a Work Capability Assessment had recently declared him ‘fit for work’. Charlie a 66-year-old ex-docker told us during the second focus group at Pennywell Comrades that his wife was disabled “but they’ve decided she’s not disabled, so we ain’t getting a penny! How is it fair that people can play the system, yet we get nothing?”.

In a context where key political speeches by members of the ruling Conservative party (e.g. Cameron, 2015a; 2015b; Duncan-Smith, 2014; Green, 2012) pit a marginalised domestic population subject to the aggressive curtailment of welfare rights against immigrant workers from the EU publicly charged with ‘damaging the labour market and pushing down wages’ (Cameron, 2015a), it is unsurprising that there are high level of support for Brexit in places like Sunderland, which have been affected by welfare reform even when not subject to high levels of inward migration from EU member states. While research participants did not subscribe to or even acknowledge the Conservative pronouncements – their view was their view – the interview and focus group data point towards the power of political discourse in creating a ‘moral panic’ around Freedom of Movement rules by overstating the level of welfare entitlement and take up amongst EU migrants. Steve a 54-year-old publican said he believed that “[EU migrants] come here to play our system”. Frank was affronted by reports that “They are claiming money for children that don’t even live in the country”, whilst Jeff contended that “They will claim our benefits but not put anything back into the system”. Subsequent research by the British Election Survey (Prosser et al., 2016) has highlighted the importance of immigration in the decisions that voters took when deciding to vote leave.

It is worth noting here that the North East is the region of the UK with the smallest proportion of non-British residents (3%), with 2013 figures indicating that there are 40,000 EU migrants and 42,000 non-EU migrants out of a total population of 2.5 million. Within the region, the local authority of Sunderland has the third lowest proportion of non-British residents after Redcar & Cleveland and Hartlepool. By contrast, across the whole of the UK the average proportion of non-British residents is 13% of the population (ONS, 2015). At the same time, Sunderland has the fastest depopulation rate of any city, with an estimated 8 per cent of the population having left since the 1980s (Islam, 2016). For research participants, then, the concerns about the welfare pressures of EU migration stem not from personal encounters with a socially constructed ‘other’, but a symbolic struggle regarding national citizenship and belonging that is traced through political discourse on welfare reform and Conservative plans to control immigration (e.g. Cameron, 2015a; 2015b) to the referendum. Indeed, we saw how participants subscribed to the ‘us’ and ‘them’ rhetoric of government, drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion with regards to the legitimacy claims for financial support from EU citizens residing in the UK:

Up here, you are who you are. We ain't racist...as long as they're coming in and putting something into the country that's ok.

Paul A, 69, ex-steel worker

Amidst a ‘new politics’ of austerity and state retrenchment (MacLeavy, 2011: 355), the movement away from collectivised forms of state support to individualised activation and deterrence (in an attempt to tackle the perceived problems of voluntary unemployment and welfare dependency) had created affinities and divisions amongst the domestic population, and between the domestic population in-coming citizens of the EU. Different forms of solidarity (and exclusion) are implied and productive mobilisations among people who share the experience of being on the wrong end of inequalities and discrimination are inhibited (Khan and Shaheen, 2017)

The configuration of new lines of inclusion and exclusion might be understood – following Balibar and Wallerstein (2010) – as a ‘displaced form of class struggle’. Instead of turning against a metropolitan multicultural elite, the economically and politically disadvantaged ‘left behind’ turn inward. As the dynamics of class discontent amplify pre-existing group differentiation, the potential for affinities amongst heterogeneous subaltern groups is lost. How contours of equivalence and difference map onto constructions of race and nation is complex. Our data indicate that race and class identity helped to shape the political positions of constituents, but not in the reductive way that has been suggested in the media. Indeed, it would be erroneous to claim

that any of the research participants who voted leave were driven by overt racism. Rather their social, economic and political dislocation left them open to persuasion by the promise of economic revitalisation upon Britain leaving the EU. Chris explained that to him the vote to leave was based on the promise that “we can get back to how it used to be”, while Ronnie a 58-year-old mechanic stated, “I want to get the North East back to being self-sufficient. I want the country to become more self-sufficient”.

The desire to ‘return’ to a bygone time was frequently articulated by research participants. Harry a 66-year-old shipyard worker reminisced about the “good old days” when Sunderland “used to have a happy buzz about the town” and Frank described a time when on Hilton Road, near the Grangetown social club where he was interviewed, “50,000 miners and shipyard workers used to walk up and down, morning and night”. In contrast, contemporary Sunderland was described by six of our interviewees as a “ghost town” because of the loss of nationalised industry and its supply of blue collar jobs that provided solid salaries, as well as an opportunity for workers to develop specialised skills. Given the Leave campaign’s appeals to nostalgia for Britain’s industrial past – with little if any recognition of the racial and gendered hierarchies that marked that era (and indeed continue to structure economy and society in the present conjecture) from either Leave or Remain campaigners – the vote for Brexit was logical. A coherent response to the seismic shifts experienced by this cohort of voters so that the need to ‘re-voice’ and protest was felt. The world in which these men lived had changed around them so quickly that a suggested reversion to when things (are recalled as being) clearer was highly appealing. Five months after the vote when our data was collected, they still subscribed to this view with research participants stating that they felt renewed and recharged by the referendum result and optimistic about the future.

I think we’ll be stronger. It’s not going to happen straight away, but I truly think we will in the long run.

Paul B, 60, HGV driver

The cost of my wine’s gonna go up. So what? It’s gonna make the English economy more viable, more domestic.

Steven, 54, publican

There was recognition that taking the country back to an ‘imaginary, purer, more wholesome past’ (Buruma, 2016) was a vast and perhaps quixotic project, but nonetheless the referendum result was significant in plotting a new course for the UK. Frank told us, “It won’t be all sunshine and roses, but this is the best decision for your generation in the long run. Mark my words”. His

optimism was shared by Paul B who proclaimed, “We’re not the town that broke the pound, we’re the town that *saved* it!”.

Prior to the Brexit vote, Sunderland was notable for speed at which council was able to count a (completely predictable) general election result. The confines of the UK electoral system mean that general elections are won and lost in key constituencies where the incumbent MP has only a small majority. Given the historic strength of Labour support in the city, it is rare that Sunderland matters politically. From election to election the only thing that changes in swing terms is the margin of labour victory. The EU referendum was different in that the yes/no vote provided an opportunity for residents to register disaffection with the status quo and for this to have governmental consequences. This was important given that many research participants reported that they had felt disenfranchised by the recreation of the Labour Party under Blair and Brown, and now found it hard to identify a party that represented their beliefs and interests given Labour leader Corbyn’s pro-European stance. As Frank said, “working class lads, coalminers and shipyard builders, they’ve lost confidence. They’re disillusioned by Labour and so what they done was, they voted for UKIP”. The UKIP, the single-issue party that spearheaded the Leave campaign, experienced a groundswell of support as the Labour Party failed to engage the working class communities that were once the party’s anchor (Chaffin, 2018). Participants reported that it was difficult for them to identify if and how their preferences were met as Labour Party members could not agree on a collective approach to key policy areas. While some balked at the imagery and language UKIP used, others have turned to the party in what Derek a 60-year old fisherman describes as a “rebellion against the establishment”. Having experienced receding employment and social mobility prospects, the ‘left behind’ found their values and priorities being pushed to the margins of public debate as the Labour Party moved first to the political right and then appointed a leader that openly identified with far-left. As they searched for a new political home, participants were willing to subscribe to a more restrictive conception of national identity that holds up ancestry, compared with the professional middle-classes, that albeit sceptical are broadly at ease with immigration, the EU and social liberalism (Ford and Goodwin, 2014).

Marginalisation, mistrust and the fate of the ‘common man’

The emergence of UKIP as a national political force did not happen overnight. Since its foundation in 1993, it has worked to attract those marginalised by the process of deindustrialisation, which atomised the workforce through the loss of unionised industry, rising unemployment and replacement jobs characterised by low pay, low skills and often zero hour contracts. With a

collective Labour identity no longer fostered in working environments, working class consciousness decreased and was further attenuated by changes in the political landscape which reduced the dominance of the two major parties in elections (Winlow et al., 2016) As the more upwardly mobile, the young, university-educated and professional workers became a primary target for Labour and the Conservatives seeking to capture the political centre, those experiencing stagnation or downward social mobility, including our cohort of working-class men aged 50 and over, felt excluded by a political class in Westminster and Brussels that they view as deceitful, indifferent and out-of-touch. As Jim, an 85-year-old ex-fisherman, commented “Tories come left and Labour gone right. They’re one and the same now”, while Bertie, a 71-year-old ex-docker remarked, “They’re all the same now...They’re all the same these politicians. Don’t trust any of them”. The fact that there was no mainstream party reflecting the values of the ‘common man’ was a primary reason for the growth of support for UKIP amongst our cohort in Sunderland. The referendum with its binary vote decisively revealed the success of the party in broadening its appeal to spell out how leaving the EU was the answer to a whole range of issues facing this cohort. UKIP sought to represent working-class white men and by focusing on the concerns and furies resultant from deindustrialisation was able to capture disenfranchised Labour voters.

In the bid for votes, UKIP and the broader Leave movement constituted class, race and nation. Encouraging a particular reading of struggles with and resentment over contracting economic opportunity in industrial and post-industrial regions of the UK as specific to older working-class white men, the Leave campaign obscured the manner in which structural inequalities prevent *all* members of the working-class from accessing opportunities, resources and power (Khan and Shaheen, 2017), as well as the role of the EU as an agent of equality and a ‘neoliberal softener’ (MacLeavy, forthcoming). While research participants said that they found UKIP too radical, many of them were willing to subscribe to the identity politics espoused by Nigel Farage, a key member of Vote Leave, and his positioning of referendum as a moment for affirming the rights and entitlements of the ‘common man’ in the face of perceived economic and political marginalisation. For instance, Paul said, “I agree with what they’re saying, but I think they...go about it in the wrong way”, while Robbie a 63-year-old postman said that although he found UKIP to be too extreme in their approach, he concurred with the channelling of economic resentments against the EU and the desire to roll back government: “Too right wing some of them [but] the idea is real – let’s get our country back”.

The support for Brexit in Sunderland underscores the safety for working-class white men in voting for Britain to leave the EU and the trade, financial, migration and social policies it has instituted. Counter to the discourse of white victimhood, we can see this cohort as being uniquely privileged in being able to register their economic grievances without fear of either the racism and intolerance that is being unleashed by the radical right, or the return to a conservative nationalism that stresses the central role of the family and its sustenance by the unpaid work of women as mothers (Hozic and True, 2017). Certainly, research participants expressed their aspiration to ‘regain control’ at any cost. The desire to leave the EU stemmed from the perception of an ineffective or corrupt European parliament, with instances of ‘failure’ cited as reasons to disengage with it rather than work to improve its institutions of governance. At the fishing quay with the last remaining 6 licensed fishing boats in Sunderland, Derek told us, “we can’t fish certain areas of *our* country yet the Spaniards can come in whenever they want!”, while Jim recounted, “I’d be throwing back dead fish to meet the quota, whilst these boats using illegal nets are fishing our shores happily. And they’ve got bigger quotas than us!”. Matt a 65-year-old fisherman explained how the wish for control was based on the feeling of having no control while being subject to EU regulations, “All they’ve done is give us law, pull us and push us”. And, having experienced this Chris argued, “it’s time this country stood on its own two feet...it doesn’t need some governing body miles away telling us what we can and can’t do”.

The struggles and challenges that the participants have experienced within the changing economy have clear and tangible impacts. However, the priority afforded in public debate to their anxieties about work, immigration and the role of the EU in threatening their livelihood and identity distracts attention from the problems others also face as a result of neoliberal fiscal and monetary policies that prioritise the ‘anywheres’ of London and the South. By giving precedence to the perceived particular experiences of older working-class males, the imaginaries attached to the Brexit vote shift focus away from how widespread the experience of economic precarity is in the twenty-first century. Economic and political restructuring is delivering heightened insecurity to not only blue-collar workers, but also men and women employed in the service industries, small business owners and the poor (Piketty, 2014; MacLeavy and Manley, 2018). While political discourse highlights the consequences of this for white workers in industrial and post-industrial regions of England, there is no account of the unique whiteness or geography of the ‘left behind’ effect (Bhambra, 2016). Rather the incorporation and exclusion of different groups in the identity politics of UKIP is a product of the insertion of everyday moralities into electoral processes (Koch, 2017).

UKIP and the Leave campaign that the party subsequently championed engaged the ‘somewheres’ of our study through the promotion of a gendered politics of white self-interest (see Walley, 2017 for a comparative account of the ‘demographic reductionism’ of 2016 US Presidential Election). In attaching partial and contested imaginaries of Britain and British citizenship to the referendum vote, the movement bypassed the extent to which social classes are being realigned as economic insecurity is becoming more widespread (Standing, 2011). It channelled frustrations with the lived experience of government into anger and acrimony and in doing so limited recognition of the underlying causes of the vacuum of employment and money in the local supply chain, including the decline of the post-war social contract and the politics of neoliberal austerity (Koch, 2017). With increasing numbers of people in Sunderland trapped in the low-pay-no-pay cycle, juggling numerous zero-hour contract jobs and/or facing job centre sanctions, the campaign encouraged voters to reminisce about a time when local industry provided reasonably well paid and rewarding careers that enabled even the young and unskilled to enjoy a modest standard of living. This led Tom to connect the area’s decline to Thatcher’s signing of the Single European Act in February 1986. It was this, he argued, that precipitated the loss of not only jobs but a sense of purpose and contribution for men in the North East. He recounted,

They’re now building a bridge for our river. It’s being built in Belgium!! It could have been built here rather than dragged across the whole North Sea!

Tom, 72, ex-miner

Similarly, when talking about the old collieries Paul stated, “Now we buy coal from Russia. How daft is that?”. For them the decision to vote leave was based on a hope that Brexit would spur domestic production and rejuvenate regional employment prospects for men. Implicit in this discussion was a sense that the negative effects of economic restructuring had been compounded by EU efforts around equality and women’s rights. Policies to support women’s waged labour emerged just as the ‘common man’ was worrying about his pay packet and have since been used to legitimise increased welfare conditionality affecting a number of participants. As Jim remarked “there was nothing wrong with this country in the 70s”, while John a 68-year old ex-miner pejoratively described the EU as being “all do-gooders [and] human rights”.

The rejection of the EU and its capacity to influence domestic policy were indicative of the mistrust of politicians as well as the machinery of government. As Steven remarked, “I don’t want them deeming what’s right for us or for any country for that matter!”. While the EU has worked to

ensure greater equality in productivity and income across regions, there was little recognition of efforts to strengthen the prosperity, stability and security of all in Sunderland through financial tools or legislation introduced to ensure that men and women benefit equally from policy and inequality is not perpetuated. As economic insecurity persists and is felt and observed in the city, a view of the EU as an external ‘other’ was communicated by participants. They saw a discrepancy between their own experiences of stagnation and decline and EU narratives related to the promotion of regional equality, which made them sceptical about the effectiveness of the institution and its power to deliver positive change for ‘the man on the street’. This led them to question the cost of membership and its contribution to Britain’s growth and development.

The EU...the only people they’re benefiting are those people [EU staff] sat in those offices

Steven, 54, publican

No one knows where the money has been going all these years...I suspect some of the directors should be in jail!

Jeremy, 84, ex-docker

Although Frank acknowledged financial support received through the EU Health Programme, he did not perceive any benefits beyond these infrastructural developments.

We’ve seen nice new hospitals, for example, the RVI in Newcastle – that’s EU funded – but we haven’t felt it in our pockets or changes in our standard of living.

Frank, 57, ex-miner

It was clear that these men felt optimistic about the post-Brexit future. They did not subscribe to the view that the EU had delivered positive change, instead advocating the possibilities created by the referendum vote to leave. As Bertie proclaimed, “we’re getting 350 million back, aren’t we? Think about that! Money in our pocket!”

Conclusion

The 2016 EU referendum result in Sunderland led to the use of the city as a symbol of a labour heartland encouraged to, potentially, sabotage its future economic development by duplicitous politicians interested in upholding and developing their parliamentary careers. Yet, our interview and focus group data told a somewhat different story. In the aftermath of the Brexit vote as 4 million people signed a petition calling for a second referendum (HM Government, 2016), we found that the Leave campaign’s core electorate – working-class white men aged 50 and over –

were content with the result of the ballot. They did not feel ‘duped’ nor a sense of regret as Britain started to negotiate its departure from the EU. Rather there was a sense of optimism and relief that the referendum vote has provided a conduit for their growing disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and anger with a form of politics that has ‘gambled on financial capitalism and European integration’ (Evans, 2017: 219). In an era when old divisions between class and related notions of a left-right divide are becoming less visible, the referendum distilled a range of (often conflicting) emotions and anxieties into two distinct choices for voters that enabled a decision on the future governance of the country to be made.

In showing how the referendum vote is deeply connected to a complex set of contexts, histories and meanings (Coleman, 2013), the data demands that we pay attention to the way in which electoral processes produce division. We need to be careful not to assume the whole country is comprised of just two types of people – leavers and remainers – and acknowledge the different ways in which people gave meaning to their votes at a time when there was no answer to the question of what Brexit itself might mean (Elliot, 2017). To engage fruitfully with the emotions that the Brexit vote has galvanised and our research in Sunderland has brought to light we need to unpack how different types of voters are borne from individual lived experiences and perceptions. By revealing the impact of recent political economic developments on the *multitude* of disenfranchised groups, we can remove the emphasis that is currently being placed on the differences between leavers and remainers (to which voters may not necessarily subscribe) and focus instead on a more inclusive politics that treats different responses to the referendum question as the basis for an open conversation about democracy and democratic ideals that extends beyond Britain’s relations with Europe.

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