

NEO-LIBERALISM, IDENTITY AND BREXIT

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Abstract. *This paper examines the underlying causes of the Leave vote. The causes can be found in the issue of identity – national identity, regional identity and in the individual sense of self worth and identity. Conceptions of identity in England have changed over the last 35 years. These changes have been the result of neo-liberalism, which has brought about a shift to a new paradigm, not just in economics, but just as importantly, in the conception of what constitutes a person and in what constitutes public, social and national life. Neo-liberalism began to reshape the UK with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, and the most significant changes in the regional distribution of prosperity and poverty began around that time, with the areas in the North and Midlands where manufacturing and heavy industry had predominated experiencing poverty, unemployment and a sense of social exclusion, while London and its immediate environs in the South East experienced a period of unprecedented prosperity, creating a group of people who saw themselves as having been “left behind” by 21st century Britain. Conceptions of identity depend as much upon material circumstances, on how prosperity and inequality are distributed in a society, as they do upon ideas and values. As a result of the economic changes wrought by neo-liberalism, the old conceptions of identity, incorporating the ideal of the English gentleman, did not survive. Although the Leave vote was ostensibly about immigration and loss of sovereignty, what lay behind these concerns were a sense of dissatisfaction with what was seen as the damage done, both to the material basis of people’s lives and to the old values and ideas of what it was to be English. The Leave vote was a response to the feeling of exclusion and powerlessness, and an awareness of regional inequality, that those groups who did not share in the prosperity of London and the South East felt, and to the sense that they had been ignored by politicians and left behind by the forces of globalisation. They identified this sense of exclusion and having been left behind with the EU, because the EU appeared to them to be the most obvious manifestation of those international and transnational forces which had reshaped their lives in negative ways. The forced choice nature of the referendum, a simple in or out vote, gave these voters the chance to either accept or to reject what*

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they saw as everything that had gone wrong over the past 35 years, an opportunity which the conventional political choice offered in General Elections had not provided. In this sense, rejecting the EU served in part as a proxy for a more fundamental rejection, that of the identities which had been foisted upon them by the neo-liberal policies which had been the dominant paradigm since 1979, and which were the result of factors that were global as much as European, and which owed their character to the actions of British politicians as much as to the decisions made by the EU.

Keywords: *Brexit, Neo-liberalism, social exclusion, EU, identity, national identity, the English gentleman, immigration, sovereignty.*

Introduction

On June 23, the UK voted to leave the EU by 51.9% to 48.1%. England voted to leave the EU by 53.4% to 46.6%. Wales voted to leave by 52.5% to 47.5%. Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU by 55.8% to 44.2%. Scotland voted to remain in the EU by 62% to 38%. Of the nine regions of England, eight voted to leave. Only London, the second most populous region in England, voted to remain, by 59.9% to 40.1%. Since the vote there have been several attempts to identify exactly who voted to leave.¹ It is clear that geography mattered, that generally speaking, the further away from London and the South East and the poorer the area, the more likely it was to vote leave. Age mattered, in that the older a voter was, the more likely they were to vote leave. Education mattered, in that the better educated one was, the less likely one was to vote leave. Poverty mattered, in that the less well paid one was and the more economically insecure one was, the more likely one was to vote leave. And party affiliation and social conservatism mattered, in that whilst unsurprisingly almost all UKIP supporters voted leave, nearly 60% of Conservative voters defied the wishes of their leader David Cameron and voted leave, and 37% of Labour voters ignored the wishes of their leader and voted leave. But answering the question who voted to leave isn't the same as explaining why people voted to leave.

I propose to offer an account as to why the majority of English people voted to leave.² This account will take the issue of identity to be the key to explaining the leave vote, Identity does not exist in a vacuum. I will argue that personal and national identity are bound together and that both are sensitive to the economic and political context in which people are obliged to live. Identity can't be divorced from the context of people's lives. I will argue that it is the changes in the conception of national identity and the attendant changes in how people as individuals see themselves that accounts for the vote to leave the EU. Around 1979, when Margaret Thatcher was elected and began to implement a neo-liberal

¹ See Matthew J. Goodwin and Oliver Heath, *Brexit vote explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities*, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities>

² The reader should be warned in advance that I will say almost nothing about Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

agenda, those groups who are most clearly associated with the vote to leave began to find themselves increasingly marginalized and excluded from the prosperity that London and the South of England enjoyed. The effect of this, and other changes brought about by neo-liberalism was to undermine the old conception which these groups had of both their own identity as individuals and their conception of national, and by that I mean English rather than British, identity.

Membership of the EU became associated through the issues of sovereignty and immigration with the forces of globalisation and the creation of supranational and transnational bodies which undermined the social and economic structures upon which older and more reassuring conceptions of identity rested, and left very little to replace that conception, beyond nostalgia and consumerism, neither of which was able to provide a basis for wanting to remain in the EU. Rather than being the result of immediate concerns about the effects of EU membership as such, immigration and loss of sovereignty, rejection of membership of the EU by the leave voters was a response to the longstanding loss of identity which was only in part a consequence of EU membership.

The British political system

Britain either doesn't have a constitution, or has an "unwritten constitution", depending on whether your political impulses incline towards Tom Paine or Edmund Burke.³ Whichever version, Paine's or Burke's, one prefers, according to Robert Colls, up to about 1980 the political system was Burkian in structure and Bagehotian in function.⁴ That is to say, it was Burkian in that it is the product of the accretions of decades of institutional practices and rules. As Burke put it, "it is a deliberation of the ages and of generations; it is a constitution made by what is ten thousand times better than choice, it is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions, and moral, civil, and social habitudes of the people".⁵ And it was Bagehotian in that its function is to disguise the fact that an elite exercise power, and that this combination of rules, procedures, practices, assigned the respective roles to what Bagehot called the dignified and the efficient aspects of the constitution. The dignified aspect being that quasi-theatrical element, which starts with the monarchy, and comprises the grand show of ceremony, seen on state occasions, The efficient aspect is that part which does the work, comprising the middle class, who behind the scenes, ensure that the state functions and that policy is decided and implemented. The lack of written

³ "A constitution is not a thing in name only, but in fact. It has not an ideal, but a real existence; and wherever it cannot be produced in a visible form, there is none... Can, then, Mr. Burke produce the English Constitution? If he cannot, we may fairly conclude that though it has been so much talked about, no such thing as a constitution exists, or ever did exist, and consequently that the people have yet a constitution to form." Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, Oxford, OUP, 2008.

⁴ Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, Oxford, Oxford Paperbacks, 2001.

⁵ Edmund Burke, "Speech on the Reform of Representation," *Works*, VI, 146–147. For a contemporary version of this see The 1997 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto. "Our constitution has been stable, but not static. It has been woven over the centuries – the product of hundreds of years of knowledge, experience and history." Available at: <http://www.conservativemanifesto.com/1997/1997-conservative-manifesto.shtml>

constitution meant that the efficient part relied upon the Burkian accumulation over centuries of rules and procedures, which were the embodiment of “the national personality, resting upon dignifying the efficiency of the quiet men, the secret men, the backroom men – the practical men who pieced it all together... The English people have been invited to trust a personality not a constitution.”⁶

This personality was given substance in the conception of the English gentleman, honourable, trustworthy, public spirited, committed to the sense of a nation, imbued with a paternalistic care, a sense that those in charge had a duty to those under them, what Colls calls, with just a hint of irony, old-fashioned Tory socialism.⁷ After the election of Thatcher in 1979, this changed. The Bagehotian personality which embodied the unwritten constitution became the more akin to the individual of neo-liberal economic theory, a self-interested, materialistic and utility maximising individual, atomistic in the sense that their relations with other individuals were at bottom contractual, based on what advantages one could obtain from them, with a view to maximising one’s gains and minimizing one’s losses. In short, the sort of relationships which Burke had deplored as representing the death of society became the basis of the constitution, and with this change, the older self conception of what it was to be English began to melt away.

Neo-liberalism and Identity

After Thatcher was elected in 1979 she brought about, with the assistance of her Chancellor Geoffrey Howe, what is now known as the Thatcher-Howe recession, the most severe recession Britain had endured since the 1930s. The effect of the Thatcher-Howe recession was to destroy large parts of British industry in the traditional manufacturing regions of the Midlands and the North of England, those regions which in June this year voted most strongly to leave the EU. The Thatcher-Howe recession started in 1980 and by 1983 for the first time in its history Britain was importing more semi manufactured and finished manufactured goods than it exported. This was a period of general de-industrialisation in the developed world, in that both employment in and the size of manufacturing relative the rest of the economy declined throughout the 1980s in the major manufacturing nations; However in all the developed countries except for Britain there was significant growth in manufacturing output, as technological changes enabled employment to decline while output increased. At the same time the rapid growth of services meant that the balance of the economy in the developed nations shifted away from manufacturing. But only Britain experienced an actual decline in manufacturing output during this period, and by far the largest decline in manufacturing employment occurred in Britain.⁸

⁶ Robert Colls, *The Constitution and the English*, “*History Workshop Journal*”, 46, 1998.

⁷ By this Colls means the one nation paternalist social democracy that formed the post war consensus from 1950-1974. Both parties, Conservative and Labour were committed to full employment and the National Health Service and the welfare state, It was the most prosperous period in Britain’s history.

⁸ Michael Kitson and Jonathan Michie, *The Deindustrial Revolution: The Rise and Fall of UK Manufacturing, 1870-2010*, in “The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, Volume 2”, Roderick Floud, Jane Humphries, Paul Johnson (eds.), Cambridge, CUP, 2014. http://www.cbr.cam.ac.uk/fileadmin/user_upload/centre-for-business-research/downloads/working-papers/wp459.pdf

Besides this, the fact that in Britain manufacturing jobs were not replaced by new jobs in services meant that for the first time since the 1930s mass unemployment returned to Britain, with 3 million unemployed (12% of the workforce). Attendant upon the rise of mass unemployment, poverty and inequality increased, with poverty affecting 22% of the population by 1990, and although it fell back to 17% by 2010 it never fell to the level it had before 1979. Inequality rose dramatically, reaching levels not seen before in modern Britain, with the Gini index, the standard measure of inequality, rising from 2.4 in 1978 to 3.51 by 2012, giving Britain the highest level of inequality in the EU.⁹ But during this period when the old manufacturing regions declined catastrophically, London and the South East prospered.

During this period of decline for the heartlands of England, London flourished. The areas which currently have the lowest gross disposable household income per head are parts of Wales and the old manufacturing regions, and the areas with the highest disposable income are London and the South East,¹⁰ with net average household income in London being almost double that of the former industrial and manufacturing heartlands of the North East.¹¹ Although only 13% of the population of Britain live in London, it accounts for 22.5% of the economic activity.¹² The effect of all these economic change has been that, as Peter Mandler points out, “the big money – and all those elites – remained firmly in London. In recent decades it has felt as if the whole country had been turned upside down and shaken, until most of the wealth and talent had pooled in the capital.”¹³

The economic effects of the past 35 years have been dramatic and disturbing. The forms of life which existed prior to the destruction of manufacturing and heavy industry which formed the basis of both economic and social life have been replaced largely by the service industries, which now represent 80% the economy of Britain. As David Cameron put it in 2010, “our economy has become more and more unbalanced, with our fortunes hitched to a few industries in one corner of the country, while we let other sectors like manufacturing slide.”¹⁴ This shift from manufacturing and heavy industry towards the service industries had a concomitant effect of identity. For the unskilled, these jobs are insecure, badly paid and unrewarding, and unlike many of the vanished industrial jobs, offer little in the way a sense of place in life.

⁹ OECD, <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>

¹⁰ Sonia Carrera and Jen Beaumont, *Income and wealth*, “Social Trends 41”, Office for National Statistics, Crown copyright, 2010. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/st.2011.10>

¹¹ The Equality Trust, *The Scale of Economic Inequality in the UK*, <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/scale-economic-inequality-uk>

¹² Office of National Statistics, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossvalueaddedgva/bulletins/regional-grossvalueaddedincomeapproach/december2015>

¹³ Peter Mandler, *Britain's EU Problem is a London Problem*, “Dissent”, June 24, 2016. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/britains-eu-problem-london-problem>

¹⁴ Davud Cameron, 28 May 2010, *Transforming the British economy: Coalition strategy for economic growth*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transforming-the-british-economy-coalition-strategy-for-economic-growth> Despite his promise to “re-balance” the economy, very little was in fact done to move secure long term jobs out of London and to the North.

For a group of people to see themselves as constituting a nation they must be able to offer an answer to the question, “Who are we?”¹⁵. But the unprecedented rate of the destruction of manufacturing which began during the Thatcher years undermined the identities that people in the industrial heartlands north of London had developed. Workers had previously found a sense of worth in their work, and a value in their lives in the old communities that were destroyed the mass unemployment of the Thatcher-Howe recession. As the gap between North and South intensified, the sense that England was one nation linked by shared interests, shared values and a shared sense of identity diminished. Whilst Thatcher’s rhetoric was of Englishness and the values that she took to be the basis for a common sense of Englishness, her policies had exactly the opposite effect. As Colls says, “No one laid more claim to the British genius for national identity than Mrs Thatcher’s Conservatives, yet no one did more to destroy it.”¹⁶

Another consequence of Thatcher’s neo-liberal revolution, was a change in the way that the idealised sense of English identity which offers a template of what Englishness is, however far from reality that template may in fact be, came to be conceived. As Bagehot pointed out, the English Gentleman was a conception that personified the English constitution, leading people to put their trust, not in institutions, but in an idealised personality. This personality, what Colls calls the old fashioned gentlemanly Tory socialist, was swept away by neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberalism has a very clear philosophical picture of human nature and of the nature of society. It isn’t empirical. Like those Enlightenment philosophers who started with an a priori conception of human nature and of society, neo-liberalism starts from a set of a priori and universal assumptions about the nature of mankind and uses that conception to explain how society functions. Individuals are self-interested utility maximising individuals with a set of ordered preferences. Society is simply an aggregate of atomistic self-interested utility maximising individuals. People enter into relationships with other individuals on a contractual basis. Hence for Hayek, the high priest of this model, the contract is the sacred bond, which ensures that society can operate, and contracts must be enforced, come what may. Thatcher, however unsophisticated she was intellectually, was strongly influenced by Hayek’s ideas. Hayek premised his thought on the crudest form of methodological individualism, a form of atomism about society that enabled him to advance the extreme position that there are no such things as moral social obligations.^{17 18} Thatcher condensed the moral nightmare of Hayek’s

¹⁵ “In this sense, globalisation is a constitutional issue. It poses the first question of the nation-state: who constitutes us?” Robert Colls, *The Lion and the Eunuch: National Identity and the British Genius*, “The Political Quarterly”, Vol. 82, No. 4, October-December 2011, p. 585.

¹⁶ Colls, *The Lion and the Eunuch: National Identity and the British Genius*, p. 583.

¹⁷ Friedrich A. von Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy*, New pbk. ed. ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). (vol. II, pp. 68, 69, 33)

¹⁸ On the falsity of Hayek’s claim see Ian Browne, *An Examination of Hayek’s Claim that the Term ‘Social Justice’ is Meaningless*, “Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations”, Vol. XI, No 1, 2014, <http://journal.ispri.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/111-125-Ian-Browne.pdf> See also Andrew Lister, *The ‘Mirage’ of Social Justice: Hayek Against (and For) Rawls*, CSSJ Working Papers Series, SJ017, June 2011, http://www.politics.ox.ac.uk/materials/centres/social-justice/working-papers/SJ017_Lister_MirageofSocialJustice.pdf

methodological individualism into the simple claim that “there is no such thing as society”.¹⁹ By this she meant that, as far as she was concerned, the mass unemployment that the Thatcher-Howe recession caused in the North and Midlands was not a political problem to be solved by political action, but a market problem, and governments are not there to interfere in market operations. She clarified her remarks in the same interview, “I think we’ve been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it’s the government’s job to cope with it... They’re casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society.” So that embodiment of Englishness, the old fashioned gentlemanly Tory socialist with a paternalistic sense of social obligation, gave way to the new model of economic man, bound by obligations to no one.²⁰

The change in national character from the English gentleman, with his paternalistic regard for others and his sense of honour and fair play, to an atomistic and selfish conception, where purely self-interested individuals followed an instrumental conception of rationality to maximise their preferences, was mirrored by changes in the composition of the House of Commons, as more middle class businessmen and fewer old fashioned Conservative patricians were to be found in the ranks of the Conservative MPs. This change in moral temperament was recognised by the more perceptive of the old Conservative politicians, notably the 90 year old former Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1984. Macmillan, in a speech which could serve as a eulogy for the passing of the English gentleman, which begins, “It breaks my heart to see what is happening in our country today...”²¹ identified a new spirit in English politics and in English life, something “dreadful and wicked” and “cynical”, and diagnoses a wicked hatred developing between the different groups in society.

Macmillan, recognised that alongside this moral change in the character of public life, there was also a “growing division of a comparatively prosperous South and an ailing North and Midlands”, which he saw as just as destructive of national life as the change in the conception of the role of public life. Both trends, the economic and moral, that Macmillan identified in 1984 increased in intensity over the following years, and nothing has happened to diminish their effects.

When Macmillan made his prescient speech in 1984, the neo-liberal project had barely begun. But a shift had occurred in the conception of the role of politicians. The model of the instrumentally rational self serving individual with

¹⁹ Margaret Thatcher, interview in *Women’s Own* magazine, October 31 1987. It is worth noting how strange it is that a politician, elected to ensure that society prospers and functions well, should deny the existence of society, the thing which provides the rationale for her own existence as a politician. But Thatcher was not the sort of person to overburden herself with intellectual matters of this kind.

²⁰ In this model, rationality has a purely instrumental function. It is of no help in deciding which preferences one should have. Preferences are not subject to rational evaluation, and one set of preferences is as good as any other. Rationality merely serves the purpose of enabling you to decide what the best way is to satisfy one’s preferences. This is not the place to discuss this, but suffice it to say that this is not a conception of rationality that either Kant or Aristotle would have recognised.

²¹ Harold MacMillan, Lord Stockton, Speech to the House of Lords, 13 November 1984. http://news.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/hi/historic_moments/newsid_8195000/8195214.stm

a fixed set of preferences which underpins the neo-liberal economic paradigm became the dominant model of economics, of society, and of political life. The aim of both principal political parties became to obtain power, rather than to offer the electorate a political vision, and political ideology became transformed from a set of principles into a purely pragmatic device adapted to winning elections. Hence the use of such devices as triangulation and focus groups – strategies for finding out the preference set of the voters and adapting one’s values and ideology to that preference set. Since both parties had largely the same view of the electorate’s set of preferences, they both attempted to appeal in largely the same way, and so differences in policy between the parties diminished to almost zero.²²

It would be a mistake to think that changes in the moral dimension of national identity happen quickly or happen in the same way for different groups. But the cumulative effect of the changes that began in 1979 and which continued more or less unabated to the present has been to create a large group of people who see themselves as left behind, excluded from the prosperity that London and the South East has enjoyed for the last 35 years, and whose sense of personal and national identity has been slowly degraded. The material basis of the traditional sense of identity which the working class had enjoyed has been destroyed by the neo-liberalism of the last 35 years, and that Bagehotian conception of Englishness, the English gentleman, with his belief in fair play, honour, honesty and a paternalistic conception of public service, has become a thing of the past. For those left behind by the march of neo-liberalism, Englishness, or at least the old idea of Englishness, no longer has a material or a moral basis.

Experts, the Elite and Trust

In June of this year one of the principal spokesmen for the leave campaign, Michael Gove, was asked what his response was to the expert view that leaving the EU would be detrimental for Britain. He said quite simply, “people in this country have had enough of experts”.

The theory of human nature which underpins neo-liberalism is a model of man in which a concept of public service has no place. Materialistic, self-interested, utility maximising individuals – atomistic units are unlikely to be public spirited. People who engage in social relations with others only because they can derive some advantage from them are unlikely to be motivated by the qualities of fair play, honour, honesty and so on associated with the English gentleman. As a model for explaining people’s behavior the neo-liberal one is not one which will inspire trust. If everyone acts out of self-interest, then elites and experts will act out of self-interest too.

In 2009 the parliamentary expenses scandal occurred. It showed that many of the expenses claims made by members of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords were fraudulent and designed simply to enrich the members at

²² See Colin Hay, *The Normalising Role of Rationalist Assumptions in the Institutional Embedding of Neoliberalism*, “Economy and Society”, (33 (3)), 2004.

the expense of the public. Several members or former members of the House of Commons, and the House of Lords were sent to prison. The effect of the expenses scandal was to destroy public trust in the honesty and integrity of politicians. The former MP Matthew Parris wrote in the Times that “extravagance, genuine mistake, sly acquisitiveness and outright criminal fraud are now jumbled together in the national mind as though there were no moral differences.” Public trust hit an all-time low. In 1997 over 80% of people described the Government as honest and trustworthy. At the time of the expenses scandal less than 10% of people were prepared to describe the Government as honest and trustworthy. While perceptions have improved since the height of the expenses scandal, research suggests that around 70% of people regard politicians as dishonest and untrustworthy.²³

It wasn't simply politicians who lost the trust of the public. The other efficient part of constitution, civil servants and those experts who assist with policy advice suffered a collapse in trust too. The role of the Governor of the Bank of England is to assist the government in determining economic and monetary policy. In 1998 the Governor of the Bank of England, Eddie George, admitted in October 1998 that he thought it was reasonable to use monetary policy to promote prosperity in the South of England, even though the consequence of this for the North of England would be increased unemployment and poverty.²⁴ No one doubted his technical expertise. What caused the uproar was that he had admitted that monetary policy pursued by the Bank of England was designed to serve the prosperous South at the expense of the far less prosperous North. George was described as “a supreme technocrat”,²⁵ but experts, it seemed, were not impartial experts. As Kitson and Michie argued in the case of Eddie George, their expertise may be underpinned by theory and ideology, which is not in any way neutral. Experts proved to be people who served the interests of those who appointed them and upon whose goodwill their continued success in life depended. And as Richard Tuck emphasized, “Technocracy is not (as some like to pretend) a neutral or rational system of government. Instead, it confers immense power on culturally select bodies whose prejudices will be those of the class their members are drawn from”.²⁶ The neo-liberal model of behavior which is supposed

²³ Paul Whiteley, Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders, and Marianne Stewart, *Why do Voters lose trust in Governments? Public Perceptions of Government Honesty and Trustworthiness in Britain 2000 – 2013*, The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, Vol. 18 (1), 2016.

²⁴ For a considered view of the relationship between inflation and unemployment and the theoretical underpinnings of Eddie George's remarks, see Michael Kitson and Jonathan Michie, “Globalisation, Unemployment and Government Policy”, in Kitson and Michie, *The Political Economy of Competitiveness. Essays on Employment, Public Policy and Corporate Performance*. “In October 1998, the Governor Eddie George proffered the view that inflation is best tackled by interest rate rises which, he admitted, would have the effect of making people in the North of England unemployed. Underlying such statements is the bank's orthodox economic modeling, based as it is on unrealistic assumptions and refuted by empirical evidence.” Kitson and Michie, p. 23.

²⁵ Obituary in The Daily Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/finance-obituaries/5183696/Lord-George.html>

²⁶ Richard Tuck, *The Left Case for Brexit*, Dissent, June 6, 2016, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/left-case-brexite

to help us understand the motivation behind the pronouncements of experts is one which serves to undermine our trust in those pronouncements. And it did nothing to inspire trust in the independent and impartial role of George that he given a succession of honours by the government, whose interests he had served and who were able to reward him. He was appointed Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire, then Baron George of St Tudy, and finally a Deputy Lieutenant of Cornwall, thus providing a nice illustration of Colls' thesis that Bagehot's dignified and efficient parts of the constitution had fused together. But by the start of the 21st century both parts, the dignified and the efficient, had forfeited the trust that had previously been placed in them. And when two years after his appointment as Deputy Lieutenant of Cornwall, the UK suffered a major banking meltdown, and the banking sector was only saved by public money providing largest financial bailout of the private sector ever seen, it became clear that experts actually had far less expertise than they pretended. The Libor scandal, details of which began to emerge in 2012, suggested that perhaps the only time one could rely upon the efficiency of Bagehot's "quiet men, the secret men, the backroom men – the practical men who pieced it all together",²⁷ was when they were engaged in rational, materialistic, self-interested dishonesty.²⁸ The idea of the English gentleman was dead.²⁹ Politicians were now regarded as amongst the least trustworthy group in England and the public had had enough of experts.

What replaced the old sense of identity?

The conception of the English gentleman was dying as an embodiment of national identity. Politicians and the elites of the efficient and the dignified part of the constitution appeared to embody more the universal qualities of man postulated by neo-liberalism than the particular qualities of the *English* man. The language of politics became the language of managerialism, with politicians encouraging the voters to choose them less and less on ideological grounds and more and more on the grounds that they were more competent than their opponents.

²⁷ This characterisation of Bagehot's view is from Colls.

²⁸ The Libor (London Interbank Offered Rate) banking scandal revealed that several well established banks had been illegally manipulating the Libor rate. For engaging in Libor manipulation, Barclays Bank was fined \$450 million in 2012. UBS agreed to pay regulators \$1.7 billion in 2012. In December 2013 the European Commission announced fines for six financial institutions. UBS received full immunity for revealing the existence of the cartels and thereby avoided a fine of around €2.5 billion for its participation in multiple infringements. Citigroup received full immunity for one of the infringements in which it participated, thereby avoiding a fine of around €55 million, but was fined €70 million for other infringements. The Royal Bank of Scotland was fined €260 million, Deutsche Bank €259 million, and JPMorgan €80 million. In July 2014, US and UK regulators slapped a combined £218 million in fines on Lloyds. On 23 April 2015, Deutsche Bank agreed to a combined US\$2.5 billion in fines. See Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libor_scandal#Early_reports_of_Libor_manipulation

²⁹ Marx's insight would have come as no surprise to the Victorian educationalist Thomas Arnold, who did more than anyone else to shape the idea of the English gentleman, wrote in 1838, "that the relation between the rich and the poor in so large a part of the kingdom is purely commercial, is itself most mischievous, because a purely commercial relation not only arises out of nothing better than self-interest, but it goes on to nothing better; it neither springs from nor leads to any feelings of admiration, confidence reverence or love which are the true feelings between man and man." *The Miscellaneous Works of Thomas Arnold: Collected and Republished*, B. Fellowes, London, 1845, p. 456.

When it comes to identity, symbols and the intangible values that inform people's sense of who they are matter. Neo-liberal man by his very nature, universal and transnational, cannot serve as a national symbol. The elites came increasingly to resemble a group of people Colls describes as forming a "new class of metropolitan-minded people [who] feel their own highly individual life styles to be superior to the lives of most other people... they look forward to a time when they can live as they want to live in a state that is enlightened, progressive, secular, civic and post-national."³⁰ Cameron, adopting a post-national global perspective, commended to the voters the favourable opinion of the Japanese Prime Minister towards the EU. It's pretty safe to say that for those disenchanted voters living outside London, the opinion of the Japanese Prime Minister was not their first consideration when deciding how to vote, but for Cameron, the dictates of neo-liberalism meant that it seemed to him that the opinion of the Japanese Prime Minister had a bearing on a question that for leave voters proved at least in part to be about English identity. It is easy to understand the prevalence of the idea that Cameron was a man who had no idea what he was doing.

While the metropolitan elites were in the process of becoming post-national and rational, the rest of the country, those who were not members of the metropolitan elites, were left with another neo-liberal conception of identity – that of the consumer, using his instrumental rationality to maximise the satisfaction of his preference set. Whatever one thinks about this as a model of humanity, it is not a model that can replace without any kind of moral loss the ideas of fair play, honesty, honour and paternalism that the English gentleman embodies. Neo-liberal man is not an image which can inspire the heart nor forge the ideals, the identifications, the broader social bonds and affections upon which a national identity is based.

'Little England' and Exceptionalism

However Thatcher, despite being the cause of this sense of loss by the economic and social havoc she wreaked in the North, at the same time articulated a 'little-Englander' form of English nationalism. Thatcher was able to serve as a figurehead for that sense of identity that she destroyed, although this tension between neo-liberal economics and the negative effects that such economics had upon society was never apparent to her.

The 'little Englanders' believe not only in the difference between England and the rest of the world, they also believe in the intrinsic superiority of the English and English ways. There has always been a strand of this in English life, and Thatcher shared this strand. Her remarks made in Paris at the time of the bicentenary of the the French Revolution, conflating Englishness with Britishness, contrasting "the Burkian high road to organic political maturity [with]... the vulgar and treacherous French carnival"³¹ were, as Steven Kaplan notes, not

³⁰ Colls, *The Lion and the Eunuch: National Identity and the British Genius*, p. 285.

³¹ Steven L. Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution: Disputed Legacies : France, 1789/1989*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 36.

merely offensive and patronizing, they were the expression of a contempt for all things foreign based on a complete ignorance of what it is one is contemptuous of.³² David Cameron, in his Speech of 9 May 2016, produced a similar mixture of exceptionalism and little Englander-ism, “We are special, different, unique. We have the character of an island nation which has not been invaded for almost a thousand years, and which has built institutions which have endured for centuries”. For Cameron history was the story of what Europe had tried to do to us and how we had defeated its attempts in battle, “Blenheim. Trafalgar. Waterloo... Either we influence Europe, or it influences us”. It seems that for Cameron the most important and successful of Britain’s recent contributions to European life was to defeat European armies. But like the English gentleman, the ways of life that sustained the little Englander mentality were also disappearing under the impact of neo-liberalism. In the nineteenth century Marx foresaw the destructive impact of laissez-faire economics upon national identity – under free trade the old certainties of life vanish and “all that is solid melts into air”.³³ Neo-liberal economics and the marketisation of those institutions and relationships that had previously formed the basis of British and English identity meant that the old sense of what it was to be English or British became merely a form of nostalgia.³⁴ As Geoffrey Howe, her former colleague and co-author of the first Thatcherite recession, remarked in his resignation speech, Thatcher’s little Englander mentality appealed to those who, buffeted by the changes she had brought about, consoled themselves retreating into “a ghetto of sentimentality about our past”.

Some voters may have had been led to vote to leave out of a sense of nostalgia. It can be hard to differentiate a sense that English exceptionalism was being lost from a nostalgic sense that the present being a falling away from a time when things were better, when life was richer and more fulfilled. To the older generation of Conservative voters Margaret Thatcher is still regarded as a hero, and her social conservatism and general hostility to things European enables her to serve as an embodiment of a better time, when England was still England, independent and proud.

The leave slogan was “take back control”, and that while for some the idea of taking control away from the EU and returning it to parliament was uppermost, for others important word here was “taking back”, where “back” suggests getting back what you once had but lost, a sense of returning to a better past, to recover what has been lost, the nostalgic dream.

³² “Human rights did not begin with the French Revolution...[they] really stem from a mixture of Judaism and Christianity...then came the Magna Charta and the Declaration of Rights of the seventeenth century and our tranquil revolution of 1688, our quiet revolution, where Parliament exerted its will over the King...it was not the sort of Revolution that France’s was...’Liberty, equality, fraternity’ – they forgot obligations and duties I think. And then of course the fraternity went missing for a long time.” Margaret Thatcher, quoted in *Le Monde*, 13 July, 1989.

³³ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*. See the discussion of this in Colls, *The Lion and the Eunuch: National Identity and the British Genius*, p. 282-4.

³⁴ For a recent version of English exceptionalism, see Adriel Kasonta, *British Euroscepticism as a sign of homage to the centuries-old tradition of concern for the identity and reason of state of the United Kingdom*, The Bruges Group, 2015.

But for other groups, those who saw themselves as having little in common with the metropolitan elites who had power, the sources of their resentment towards the present were unrelated to a sense of exceptionalism or nostalgia. For the older generation of former industrial workers, Thatcher was not the embodiment of a better more English way of life, but the person whose neo-liberalism had undermined their old forms of life and the cause of their sense of dislocation. As Colls puts it, “At the heart of her project was marketisation and privatisation. Markets do not respect the status quo and, in its encouragement of market forces, Thatcherism irreparably weakened intermediate and characteristic British institutions.”³⁵ The refusal to accept the present and a longing for the past are not the same, although the refusal to accept the present may be grounded in a sense of a different kind of life having been lost. There is a lot of truth in the Remainers claim that the Leavers did not know what they were voting for. The Remainers, unwilling to accept any rational account of the behavior of the leave voters, suggest that because they did not know what they were voting for they simply didn’t know what they were doing, and need to be guided away from their irrationality by the metropolitan elite. But there was nothing irrational about the leave voters choice. They were offered a simple choice between a present with more of what they didn’t want, or an unknown future. Given the sharp and simple binary nature of the choice, the lack of nuance in terms of choices that the referendum offered, it is hardly unsurprising that they voted to reject what they didn’t want and opt for the uncertainty of a future outside the EU.

What enabled them to make this choice was the fact that the British political system has, over the last 20 years, failed to offer a parliamentary way for articulating this dissatisfaction, as both major parties in England have been committed to the neo-liberal paradigm.³⁶ The most effective slogan used by the Leave campaign was “taking back control”. This phrase has a certain ambiguity, identifying a sense in which people are no longer in control of their own destiny and offering a sense in which that control can be returned to them. It suggests that as a nation, by severing its links with the EU, Britain could take control of its own destiny and at the same time individuals who felt that their lives had become less their own, and that they were, as Peter Mandler describes it, “feeling like non-people, uncitizens, their lives jerked about like marionettes by wire-pullers far away.”³⁷

The Pragmatic Justification for EU Membership – identity and economics

Since 1979 the justifications for being a member of the EU have been purely pragmatic. Subsequent justifications remained essentially the same – that the EU brought significant economic benefits to Britain. And Cameron repeated the

³⁵ Robert Colls, *After Bagehot: rethinking the constitution*, “The Political Quarterly”, vol. 78, no. 4, 2007, p. 524.

³⁶ The position in Scotland is very different. Both the Conservative and Labour parties have been wiped out in Scotland. The SNP, a party which rejects the neo-liberal consensus in favour of old fashioned social democracy, won 56 out of the 59 constituencies in Scotland.

³⁷ Mandler, *Britain’s EU Problem is a London Problem*.

argument that if the EU ceased to bring any benefits to Britain, then there was no point remaining in it.³⁸ The effect of this pragmatic based on material self-interest was to exclude the possibility of a more complex identity, to exclude from public discourse a sense of being European as well as English and British, the kind of broad European identity which Stefan Berger has called “alternative participatory solidarities to those of national identities and national histories”.³⁹

For the bureaucratic, political and business elite a neo-liberal self-interested post-national identity may be a reality. But for those outside London who have endured prolonged economic insecurity there is no such possibility. While such people have seen the transformation of their neighborhoods and jobs from being a source of social identity into places where discrete individuals live as atomic units, and where self-fulfillment is now more likely to be found in being a consumer than in forms of life built upon enduring social bonds, this has not resulted in them developing a post-national identity. Unlike ethnically diverse London, where most residents were not born there, 60% of English people live within 20 miles of the place they were born. Their roots are local and regional and national. And for those without much money, consumerism offers a less than satisfying way of establishing one’s self identity. In the old former industrial city of Sunderland, for example, where only 4% of the population are immigrants and where average wages are 80% of the national average, over 60% of the voters opted for leave.

The pragmatic justification of membership of the EU rested upon the claim that it brought prosperity. 2016 was probably the wrong time to suggest to people that the EU had been an economic success. The recession which followed the banking crisis led to a dramatic decline in income for most people, but particularly for those poorer sections of society living far away from the prosperous South East, as the Conservative government’s policy of austerity reduced their incomes and undermined those public institutions, such as schools and hospitals, that are central to their lives. As James Stafford says, “This dizzying assault on the public realm was entirely domestic in its origin: no Brussels diktat has forced the further degradation of local government, schools, universities, trade unions, the National Health Service, or the BBC”.⁴⁰ But what Stafford calls David Cameron’s “lazy populism”, meant that the public at large were unlikely to make a distinction between the purely domestic policy of austerity, the consequences

³⁸ “We are rightly suspicious of ideology, and sceptical of grand schemes and grandiose promises. So we have always seen the European Union as a means to an end – the way to boost our prosperity and help anchor peace and stability across the European continent – but we don’t see it as an end in itself... I have just one yardstick: how do we best advance our national interest... If my experience as Prime Minister had taught me that our membership of the EU was holding Britain back or undermining our global influence, I would not hesitate to recommend that we should leave.” David Cameron, Speech, 9 May 2016. <http://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2016/05/camersons-speech-on-brexite-full-text.html>

³⁹ Stefan Berger, *History and national identity: why they should remain divorced*, History and Policy, December 2007. <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/history-and-national-identity-why-they-should-remain-divorced>

⁴⁰ James Stafford, *The Right-Wing Roots of Britain’s EU Referendum*, Dissent, June 6, 2016. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/anxiety-opportunism-and-the-right-wing-roots-of-britains-eu-referendum

of the global recession and the effects of EU agreements. There could hardly have been a worse time to commend economic success than the prolonged period of austerity which followed the worst recession since the 1930s. But with no other form of argument available to him, Cameron was forced to rely on the pragmatic justifications for continuing membership of the EU. While the prosperous South might see the merit of arguments based on prosperity, these arguments were clearly unsuccessful with voters outside London and the South East. Unlike Eddie George, the voters in the North, who had been forced to pay for the cost of saving the financial institutions based in London, could see no reason why they should continue to accept low wages and poor living standards in order to ensure the continued prosperity of London and the South East.

Sovereignty and immigration

Timothy Garton Ash identified the two principal reasons for the leave vote as being migration and sovereignty.⁴¹ While unquestionably leave voters identified immigration as a major concern, the relationship between numbers of immigrants in a particular area and the level of support for Brexit is far from straightforward. London voted to remain by 60% to 40%, but London is one of the most ethnically diverse cities on Earth. Only 44.9% of its population is White British. 37% of the population was born outside the UK, and 24.5% were born outside Europe.⁴² According to Colantone and Stanig, “If anything, it seemed that areas with more arrivals were more likely to vote Remain, and areas with fewer arrivals supported Leave. For instance, in the region with the lowest rate of new arrivals – the Tees Valley and Durham – voters supported Brexit by a remarkable 60 percent... there is really no detectable relationship between how many immigrants arrived in recent years and how much support the Leave option received in the referendum.”⁴³ Goodwin and Heath found that the relationship between leave voting and the number of immigrants in an area was complex, as “areas with relatively high levels of EU migration tended to be more pro-remain, [but] areas that had experienced a sudden influx of EU migrants over the last 10 years were often more pro-leave.”⁴⁴

Interest based explanations for hostility to immigration assumes that competition between domestic workers and immigrants for scarce resources provides the motivational basis for opposition to immigration.⁴⁵ Assuming that worries about material interests were at the heart of the leave vote, one of the derided experts, John Van Reenen, suggested that they simply needed to explain that these

⁴¹ Timothy Garton Ash, *The existential threat to the EU runs far wider than Brexit*, “The Asahi Shimbun”, July 22, 2016. <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201607220001.html>

⁴² United Kingdom Census 2011.

⁴³ Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig, *The real reason the U.K. voted for Brexit? Jobs lost to Chinese competition*, The Washington Post, 7 July 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/07/07/the-real-reason-the-u-k-voted-for-brexiteconomics-not-identity/>

⁴⁴ Goodwin and Heath, *Brexit vote explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities*.

⁴⁵ For example, John Sides and Jack Citrin, *European Opinion About Immigration: The Role of Identities, Interests and Information*, “British Journal of Political Science”, 37, 3, July 2007, p. 480, p. 478.

worries about material interests were unfounded.⁴⁶ But as we saw it was often the areas with the lowest levels of immigrants, many of them the depressed former industrial centres in the North, which voted Leave. Sunderland for example, which voted to leave by 61.3% to 38.7%, has fewer than 4 percent foreign-born residents, well below the national average of 12 percent. It is hard to see immigrants being a threat to either to local identity or to material interests in an area like Sunderland.

Generally speaking, Britain has a relaxed attitude to immigrants. 7,993,480 people, 12.7 of the population, were born outside Britain, with the largest group, over half a million, coming from Ireland. There has generally been an unproblematic acceptance of immigrants, due in part to the fact that the “acknowledged multinational character of the British nation allows for the toleration of different ethnic and national communities with different lifestyles within the framework of one all-embracing though loosely integrated nation. British nationhood does not entail a mission as we can recognize it in the French republican idea with its strong requirement of assimilation... It is a much more relaxed idea of a framework of living together... self-conscious enough to let others share in its achievements and to let them carry on whatever they want to preserve of their culture of origin.”⁴⁷

It is hard to reconcile the claims of xenophobia made by despairing Remain voters like Timothy Garton Ash with the idea of a nation tolerant of different ethnic and national communities with different lifestyles.⁴⁸ Peter Mandler rightly says that while “on the surface, immigration was undoubtedly the leading anti-Europe issue... complaining about immigration seems a clear proxy for complaining about social exclusion.”⁴⁹

The referendum, by offering a simple binary choice, asked those left behind by neo-liberalism to choose between accepting or rejecting the present. The older the voters were, the more likely they were to vote, and the more likely they were to vote leave. The highest turnout was those over 65, with an 83% turnout, and 63% of this age group voted to leave.⁵⁰ Material interest explanations hardly seem plausible for this group. Whilst there may be concerns about access to health care amongst this group, as pensioners, they are the group least likely to be worried about those material interest concerns identified by John Van Reenen,

⁴⁶ “It would certainly be a great thing if more academic economists were involved in talking to the public. Basic fallacies like thinking there is a fixed number of jobs, so immigration (and population growth for that matter) must be bad for unemployment are rampant.” John Van Reenen *The aftermath of the Brexit vote – the verdict from a derided expert*, LSE European Politics and Policy blogs, Aug. 3, 2016. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/08/03/the-aftermath-of-the-brexit-vote-the-verdict-from-a-derided-expert/>

⁴⁷ Markus Thiel, *The Limits Of Transnationalism Collective Identities And EU Integration*, Palgrave Macmillan Houndmills, 2011.

⁴⁸ “At the moment, all the affective power of England and Englishness is being taken by the conservative, Eurosceptic, xenophobic end of the spectrum, all the way from the extremist English Defence league to mild middle England Brexitism.” Timothy Garton Ash, *England can be true to itself; if liberals reclaim patriotism*, The Guardian, April 15, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/15/england-liberals-patriotism-nationalism-flag-st-george-right>

⁴⁹ Mandler, Britain’s EU Problem is a London Problem.

⁵⁰ Source <http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2016/06/brexit-vote-one-chart> A degree of scepticism might be appropriate about the figures and they should be regarded as plausible estimates rather than hard facts.

the threat to their jobs and concerns that their children might not be able to find a good school, for the simple reason that most of them will not be in work nor will they have children of school age.

As Mandler says, the widening divide between London and its environs and the rest of the country, especially the former industrial regions of the North, which manifested itself in the Brexit vote is rooted in inequality, and above all about the consequences of inequality for the sense of culture and community.

The leave vote was related to concerns about identity and material security, but these concerns were already there, before the admission of Romania and Bulgaria to the European Union in 2007, and before the admission of the A10 countries in 2004. Because immigration is characteristically associated with concerns about identity and material security, it was easy for it to serve as a proxy for these concerns, but the basis of these concerns had nothing to do with recent immigration from the EU. The causes were much more long standing, going back to 1979. As Colantone and Stanig conclude, “So what’s the most likely explanation for the Brexit vote? It’s economic globalization, not immigration. Displaced British manufacturing correlates far more strongly with a pro-Brexit vote than immigration does, no matter what voters say after the fact. They might not realize it, but voters may actually want to leave the World Trade Organization or the global economy more than they want to leave the E.U.”

Sovereignty

The price of a creating a single market was that certain decisions, which had traditionally been the preserve of Parliament, passed to the EU. The most significant aspect of policy in terms of the leave vote was the principle of freedom of movement for labour. Agreeing to this requirement meant that Parliament no longer had control of Britain’s borders. Britain could no longer decide who was allowed into the country. However, the British had, in many ways the best deal. They didn’t join the Schengen area, and they have not taken any significant role in addressing the refugee crisis.⁵¹ And by refusing to join the Euro zone Britain retained more control over its financial policy. So Britain actually had more control in key areas than most other EU countries.

The results of the Eurobarometer 61 survey conducted by the European Commission in 2004, revealed that in response to the question “What does the EU mean to you?”, 29% of UK respondents said “loss of cultural identity”, more than double the EU average, and a figure which was showing a tendency to increase over time, having risen from 14% in 1997 and 22% in 2002.⁵² The

⁵¹ The highest number of first time asylum applicants in the first quarter of 2016 was registered in Germany (with almost 175,000 applicants, or 61% of total applicants in the EU Member States), followed by Italy (22,300, or 8%), France (18,000, or 6%), Austria (13,900, or 5%) and the United Kingdom (10,100, or 4%). Of these 10,100 applicants to Britain, 2,800 were Syrian refugees. Britain chose not to participate in the scheme to relocate refugees from Italy and Greece. Data from Eurostat.

⁵² Eurobarometer 61, *Public Opinion In The European Union*, “National Report United Kingdom, European Opinion Research Group EEIG”, European Commission, Spring 2004. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb61/nat_uk.pdf

popular press portrayed the EU as a threat, not merely to the sovereignty of Parliament, but to people's ability to control the everyday aspects of their lives. Writing in the Daily Mail, Max Hastings described this felt threat, "The European superstate will finally finish off our traditional sense of belonging. When pounds and ounces are forgotten, and a single standard for vehicles, buildings, beaches, taxes – even water – rules us all, who will remember the glorious days of regional accents, local customs, village rivalries and national pride?"⁵³ But sovereignty in many of these areas could not be at risk from the EU, as they are areas over which the EU has absolutely no control – regional accents, local customs, village rivalries and national pride.

The reality is that most people have only the most rudimentary ideas about politics.⁵⁴ As Thiel points out the British public is largely ignorant about the the role and effects of EU institutions and policies, with the media helping to create "a large uninformed strata of the population".⁵⁵ Like immigration, concerns about sovereignty seem to be about something other than what at first sight they appear to be about. Voters make their choices as much on affective reasoning as on knowledge. "Knowing who they are or are not – the cultures to which they do and do not belong – helps them to begin sorting their preferences. Cultural identity enables individuals to answer for themselves the crucial quantitative and qualitative questions about preferences."⁵⁶ But affective choices are not going to be based on careful considerations of detail.⁵⁷

The leave slogan, taking back control, left it open who was taking back control, and control over what. This vagueness enabled voters to make an association between the lack of control they felt in their own lives with the the idea of recovering national sovereignty. The ways on which old conceptions of identity had been undermined were, as Colantone and Stanig point out, based on longstanding threats to identity rather than a specific and well founded anti EU sentiment. The rejection of the EU was as much a rejection of the British political elite's endorsement of the technocratic politics of the neo-liberal state as a rejection of the EU. The EU and contemporary Britain are seen as exemplifications of the same phenomenon – elites at the centre of power having little regard for the concerns and interests of those who live outside the centre, and whose lives have been diminished by the changes of the last 35 years.

⁵³ Max Hastings, *History, Pride, and Crisis of Identity*, "Daily Mail", May 4, 2002.

⁵⁴ For example, only 56% of voters know that Members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the voters. *Public attitudes towards the House of Lords and to House of Lords Reform*, House of Lords Library note LLN2012/028,

⁵⁵ Thiel, p. 65.

⁵⁶ Aaron Wildavsky, *Choosing Preferences by Constructing Institutions: A Cultural Theory of Preference Formation*, "American Political Science Review", Vol. 81, No. 1, March 1987. p. 16.

⁵⁷ The educated Remain voters should not feel too superior to the uneducated Leave voters. As Wildavsky points out the educated middle class usually have a wide range of political opinions on matters they cannot possibly know much about. They are just as likely to make their political choices on affective grounds as anyone else.

Conclusion

For the middle classes, this was a result that was never meant to happen. Bagehot wrote *The English Constitution*, in 1867, the year in which a Conservative Prime Minister enfranchised the working class. By 1867 the ruling elites had overcome their longstanding worry that giving the vote to the working class might lead to the working class using the vote to effect a quiet revolution. They might vote for a redistribution of wealth, income, educational and social opportunity, for higher wages and lower dividends, in short, for socialism. Bagehot's genius was to explain how in a mass democracy, the middle class could rule much as they pleased and yet manage to secure popular assent to this, in short, how "the will of the few could be made to look like the will of the many."⁵⁸ The Brexit result was not supposed to happen for very Bagehotian reasons – the will of few, the technocratic pro EU elite, was meant to prevail. The result means that, to the dismay of the middle class few, the will of the many prevailed, and the policy of government now will be to implement the will, not of the few, but of the many. The middle class cannot believe that the unwritten Bagehotian constitution has been allowed to produce such an outcome, and so they have launched a quiet revolt against democracy, holding mass demonstrations in the streets of London, calling upon the government to ignore the referendum, and launching legal challenges against the Prime Minister's decision to leave the EU by triggering Article 50 on the basis of Royal Prerogative. The result of the referendum, which represented the rejection by the majority of the voters of the rule of the established elites, and the subsequent reaction from the middle classes in calling for the rejection of the democratic outcome are perhaps two "morbid symptoms" of the death of the old gentlemanly personification of national identity, which in 2011 Colls predicted would start to appear.⁵⁹

The Brexit vote was the result of that group of people who saw themselves as having been left behind in British life. While London and the South East prospered, they saw their lives as constrained and at the mercy of forces over which they had no control, as Mandler said, "feeling like non-people, un-citizens, their lives jerked about like marionettes by wire-pullers far away." This perception was not wildly inaccurate. Whilst the leave voters may not have been entirely right to see the EU as the cause of their problems, they were certainly correct in identifying the processes of globalization, of which the EU is a part, as underlying many of the negative changes that their societies had experienced in the previous 35 years, hence the prevalence of leave voting amongst older voters. They had lived in a different kind of society when they were younger, and they preferred the past.

Far from representing the canaille, the ignorant rabble of middle class imagination, the leave voters had a clear sense of what the cost of the previous 35 years had been. They recognised that while the promised benefits may have materialised in London and the South East, these benefits had not materialised for them. Their lives had become economically insecure, old skills had become

⁵⁸ Colls, *After Bagehot: rethinking the constitution*.

⁵⁹ "Our current crisis is that our leaders believe that the national is dying and the postnational has yet to be born. In the interregnum, morbid symptoms have begun to appear." Colls, *The Lion and the Eunuch: National Identity and the British Genius*, p. 589.

worthless and the old forms of relationships and satisfactions based on the established patterns of work had disappeared as those forms of work vanished. De-industrialisation happened throughout the EU, but nowhere was it so badly managed as in Britain, with such a disregard for the people who would have to endure its consequences. And the geographical distribution of industry was such that a regional distribution of prosperity resulted, with London and the South East reaping the benefits and the rest of the country paying the costs. Thatcher set about making a good society for “her kind of people”,⁶⁰ but this division of British society into those who deserve the benefits and those who don’t, resulted in the entrenched social divisions that have born fruit in the leave vote.

The consequences of these changes was to lead people to feel insecure in their identity, both personal and national. The answers to the twin questions, “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” changed between 1979 and 2016. The answers that would have served to define one’s identity in 1979 would no longer be appropriate in 2016. And for the left behind, the answers they would be able to offer in 2016 were not good enough. They were, as far as they were concerned, the wrong answers. One of the objections to the result made by the distressed remain votes of the prosperous middle classes is that the leave voters didn’t know what they were voting for. This is not quite true. The referendum offered a forced binary choice – in or out, without any nuances or any attempt to offer intermediate positions, and what the actual political and economic consequences of leaving would be was something no one could clearly specify, as they still have to be negotiated. In that sense the leave voters could not know what they were voting for. But they knew what they were voting against, and that proved to be conclusive.⁶¹

The worry is that the political elite have missed the point. 52% of the population voted against the existing social and geographical distribution of wealth, income and opportunity which has been maintained by a technocratic elite, in whom they have little trust. This political elite regard leaving the EU as a technical problem, which can be solved by the existing technocratic elite on the basis of its current ideology, without needing to make any changes to the existing social and geographical distribution of wealth, income and opportunity. Given this, more of Colls “morbid symptoms” may yet appear.⁶²

⁶⁰ This was a phrase she used to describe both political devotees, and her “natural” constituency – the middle class of the South of England. Not only did she create the conditions which led in the end to the leave vote, her obsession with England and indifference to Scotland and Wales led to the electoral success of the Scottish National Party and may yet lead to the break up of the United Kingdom.

⁶¹ “The more people are able to choose sides – ours versus theirs – ‘the more they appreciate the differences between the issue positions of the two sides. What counts then, is not how people feel towards groups, one by one; rather it is how they feel toward *pairs* in opposing groups’ (p. 1075). It is precisely this pairing or, more accurately, this triangulation of rival cultures, I believe, that enables people to position themselves in political life.” Wildavsky, *Choosing Preferences etc.* The embedded quotation is from Henry E. Brady and Paul M. Sniderman, *Attitude Attribution: A Group Basis for Political Reasoning*, “*The American Political Science Review*”, Vol. 79, No. 4, Dec., 1985.

⁶² Since completing this paper, my attention has been drawn to Avner Offer’s paper, *British Manual Workers: From Producers to Consumers, c. 1950-2000*, University of Oxford Discussion Papers in Economic and Social History, Number 74, December 2008, available at <http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/economics/history/Paper74/74offer.pdf> This discusses in considerable depth the economic and social changes which occurred in the British manual working class, and led to their residual elements coming to form the “left behind” group.

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