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## Explaining ‘Brexit capital’: uneven development and the austerity state

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### ABSTRACT

The precise moment that triggered the EU referendum had its roots in the Europhobia that lurked within the soul of the Conservative Party. It has been deeply perturbing to witness such Europhobia played out in the form of an internal party political melodrama while the scandalous socio-economic fissures that fed the Brexit insurgence appeared to represent a mere side-show. Taking inspiration from recent work on Brexit as a *critical conjuncture*, this paper examines how part of this insurgence emerged as a ‘revolt of the regions’ led by communities that had endured sustained economic dispossession of public goods and services further exacerbated by the steadfast commitment by Conservative-led governments to a politics of austerity. In then sharpening the focus on to Stoke-on-Trent – baptized ‘Capital of Brexit’ in light of its status as *the city* with the highest Leave majority – the paper reveals deep-seated political disaffection as people railed against prolonged economic abandonment and social injustice. It further identifies how at the very heart of the Brexit conjuncture was a growing disconnect between citizens and the institutions of government, what amounts to a gradual exhaustion of consent for the neoliberal political economic mainstream. It has also resulted in a highly discordant state that is struggling to balance the process of extricating the UK from the EU with the management of a society that is now more imbalanced than at any time in living memory.

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There were people turning up who had never voted before. They did it this time because they were very angry with what they felt had been done to them in their communities over decades – the decline of industry, the rapid increase in people coming to this country, the levels of austerity. In a general election they might think it doesn’t matter who you vote for because they’re all the same. In the referendum they recognised this could lead to something different (Will Straw, Executive Director *Britain Stronger in Europe* campaign; cited in Behr, 2016).

There are many lessons from the referendum, but a clear one is that many people now feel that they have little or no control over their lives. There is a sense of powerlessness that mocks the self-governing promise of democracy. In this context, the EU referendum seemed to offer an opportunity to reclaim lost power – over our laws, over our rulers, over our borders – that

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was eagerly taken, despite the authoritative warnings about the dire economic consequences of doing so (Wright, 2017, p. 191).

## 1. Approaching Brexit: a ruptural conjuncture

On 23 June 2016, the citizens of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland were asked to vote on the following question: ‘Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?’ The outcome of the plebiscite was dependent on a simple majority. And at 0440 on 24 June, television and radio stations began calling the result: on a turnout of over 72 per cent, 51.9 per cent had voted to leave. Within moments, Nigel Farage, ebullient leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), faced the cameras and applauded a ‘victory for real people’. Pound sterling began tumbling. By 0815, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, had tendered his resignation. It is well nigh impossible to overstate the societal shockwaves that ensued: the *New York Times* headlined simply with ‘British stun the world with vote to leave the EU’. Closer to home some vehemently anti-EU tabloid newspapers rejoiced with headlines of ‘We’re Out’ (*Daily Mail*) and ‘See EU Later’ (*Sun*) (Beckett, 2016). In the *Financial Times*, Philip Stephens (2016) described ‘a vote that changed everything [with] economic and foreign policies crafted over nearly half a century overturned in the course of a single night’, while his colleague, Martin Wolf, defined it as ‘probably the most disastrous single event in British history since the second world war’. *The Guardian* columnist, Timothy Garton Ash, lamented the outcome as a ‘body blow to the West, and to the ideas of international cooperation, liberal order and open societies’.

Amid such melodramatic and caustically divided opinion, the result was also inferred to symbolize a United Kingdom now patently *disunited*. Indeed an *Economist* (2016) leader concluded how the

division between London, which voted strongly for *Remain*, and the north, which did the reverse, reveals a sharply polarised country, with a metropolitan elite that likes globalisation on one side and an angry working class that does not on the other.

Even allowing for the pithiness demanded of a hot-press editorial, this rudimentary assertion is misleading and a simplification of the intricate sociology and geography of the Brexit vote. For sure, the proportion of the working class that voted *Leave* was 63 per cent, significantly higher than the 44 per cent of middle class voters<sup>1</sup>. It was nonetheless the latter group which constituted two-thirds of the total vote in the referendum: the upshot of which is that 59 per cent of those who voted for Brexit were in fact middle class (Dorling, 2016). Moreover, while across England the highest *regional* proportions for Vote Leave were in the East and West Midlands followed by the North East and Yorkshire and Humberside, with the exception of London, the southern regions also voted majority leave and in significantly large numbers to prove decisive in the outcome (Williams, 2016)<sup>2</sup>. Polarization was actually more inter and intra-local than inter-regional. For just as the great northern English cities of Liverpool and Manchester returned majorities for Remain, so the global *cosmopolis* of Greater London was itself punctuated by a *40 per cent vote to leave*. The complexity of this electoral geography was intensified by the people of Scotland and Northern Ireland voting to keep their nations inside the European Union, thereby placing the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom in jeopardy (Cochrane, 2018; Wright, 2017).

Temporality also matters. To be sure, and as will become apparent in the discussion below, the referendum result brought into sharp focus so-called ‘left behinds’, whether in reference to people or places (Ford & Goodwin, 2014). Nonetheless, the country did not suddenly *become* radically unequal on 23 June 2016. Understanding this demands an appreciation of the devastation waged upon many communities resulting from the political commitment – embraced by successive Westminster governments – to a neoliberal accumulation regime increasingly dependent upon predatory dispossession of public goods and services; and further, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis an unyielding adherence to a merciless state project of enduring austerity (Hall, Massey, & Rustin, 2013; Harvey, 2012; Jessop, 2018a; Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley, & Ling, 1988; O’Hara, 2014; Seymour, 2014; Walby, 2015). To therefore posit *globalization* as an explanation for the Brexit result as per *The Economist* thereby ‘bleaches out the crisis-ridden turbulence of contemporary capitalism’ (Watkins, 2016, p. 6). Putting it more concretely, might an equivalent referendum held in the midst of the debt-financed ‘long boom’ which preceded the 2008 crash have provided a different outcome (Kitson, Martin, & Tyler, 2011; Pettifor, 2006)? Furthermore, *globalization* surely represents ‘an inadequate proxy for European integration’ (Watkins, 2016, p. 6), about which it must be assumed a certain proportion of referendum votes were cast. Consider too the temporality of political epochs and associated sequencing of events: from the acrid ‘Euroscpticism’ that bedevilled the Conservative government of the mid-1990s through to the local electoral inroads achieved by UKIP in the 2010s, and the moment where Prime Minister Cameron engaged in the high stakes gamble of promising a referendum in the 2015 Conservative Party (2015) election manifesto (Clarke, 2018).

All of which at least in part serves to reveal the complex aetiology of Brexit. And yet as outlined by Clarke and Newman (2017, p. 102), so much ensuing commentary has tended to ‘oscillate between the immediacy of specific events (... [like ...] ministerial pronouncements) and the search for the deep causes behind Brexit (such as globalization, deindustrialization, neo-liberalism, the dispossessed or forgotten working class ...)’. They go on to argue that, given how the moment of Brexit condensed ‘a range of conditions and causes’ (Clarke & Newman, 2017, p. 102), it is most appropriately interpreted to be a critical moment in a wider *conjuncture*. In making this claim, they draw on the pioneering work of Stuart Hall and colleagues<sup>3</sup>, which investigated the conjunctural crisis in the political hegemony of social democracy in the UK that paved the way for Thatcherism to emerge as a state project that coupled ‘authoritarian populism’ with a neoliberal economic trajectory. Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts (2013, p. xv) interpret the concept of *conjuncture* to designate ‘a specific moment in the life of a social formation and refers to a period in which the antagonisms and contradictions, which are always at work in society, begin to “fuse” into a ruptural unity’<sup>4</sup>. Such an approach invites an appreciation of the miscellaneous economic trends, the accumulation of social tensions and the gradual erosion of instituted consent, alongside the sources of political and cultural conflict that generated the very conditions for Brexit to happen (Clarke, 2018; Clarke & Newman, 2017). Crucially, then:

Conjunctural analysis [...] challenges a narrower focus on the day-to-day dramas of the political mainstream [by] look[ing] to the organisations of power blocs, the relation between the cultural, economic, political and social, and at the ideas and institutions that sustain them and the relationships between them<sup>5</sup> (Grayson & Little, 2017, p. 65).

Such a perspective demands some analytical focus on the institutional form and the strategic direction and routine functioning of the state. It is here that Bob Jessop's strategic-relational approach to state power might compliment the principles of conjunctural analysis, not least given his insistence on how the strategic capacity of any given state to perform specific actions is only dependent on the balance of economic and social forces and (often informal) social bases of support that gain access to, and operate through, the state as an institutional ensemble. In appreciating these inconstant relational arrangements, it becomes possible to identify how – *pace* a view of the state as some auto-controlled choreographer of global neo-liberalism – through a continuous process of strategically selective incorporation, certain interest groups throughout economy and society are offered privileged access to the various institutional divisions of the state. It is only through this *politically* manipulated modality of instituted state power that the strategic direction and policy interventions of any given state may be choreographed to favour those very interest groups, classes, places and regions over subaltern classes and places (Jessop, 1990, 2016). Since June 2016, the Brexit conjuncture has continued to propel the UK austerity state toward momentous discord. In this regard Jessop's perspective could open the conceptual space to examine several key processes (MacLeavy, 2018), not least: 1) the internal disunity that punctuates several branches of the state – including the Parliamentary Parties – and which continues to frustrate the formulation of a politically credible path to extricate the UK from the EU while also aiming to sustain delivery of the day-to-day functions of government; and 2) to interrogate the ongoing struggle within the UK state to mobilize a coherent base of corporate and national-popular support with which to reassert political legitimacy amid the chaos of Brexit.

The remainder of the paper is presented in four additional sections. Section 2 investigates how the precise moment that triggered the EU referendum has its roots in the Europhobia lurking within the soul of the Conservative Party. It has been deeply perturbing to witness such Europhobia played out periodically in the form of an internal party political melodrama while the scandalous socio-economic fissures that fed the Brexit insurgence represented a mere side-show: for at stake has been the country's economic future and the institutional integrity of its state. The subsequent section offers a political economic autopsy dissecting the relatively high levels of support for *Vote Leave* in purportedly 'left behind' localities in the north and midlands of England. It reveals the unanticipated result to be in part a 'revolt of the regions', led by communities that had endured sustained economic dispossession only then to be exacerbated by the steadfast commitment by Conservative-led governments toward a politics of austerity. Section 4 sharpens the focus on to Stoke-on-Trent in the northern west midlands. Baptized 'Capital of Brexit' in light of its status as *the city* with the highest Leave majority, the discussion reveals deep-seated political disaffection, with many people railing against prolonged economic abandonment and social injustice. The final section identifies how lying at the very heart of the Brexit conjuncture was a disconnect between citizens and the institutions of government, what amounts to a gradual exhaustion of consent for the political economic mainstream that has characterized the last thirty years in the UK. It has also resulted in a highly discordant state that is struggling to balance the process of extricating the UK from the EU with the management of a society that is now more imbalanced than at any time in living memory (Dorling, 2018).

## 2. Alas, they didn't 'stop banging on about Europe': the narrow political passageway to Britain's 'Independence Day'

I will win [the Scottish Referendum] easily and put to bed the Scottish question for twenty years. The same goes for Europe (UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, speaking in 2014 to Herman Van Rompuy, former President of the European Council; cited in Callinicos, 2016).

The decision by the British people to leave the European Union is this country's single biggest democratic act in modern times ... But it is also one of the elite's most significant blunders, provoked by the most senior politicians for the wrong reasons (Marr, 2016).

It was the autumn of 2006 and the Party conference season. The Conservative and Unionist Party, Britain's 'natural party of government', was most uncharacteristically enduring a tenth successive year in opposition. Its new leader, David Cameron, used his conference speech to implore the Party to 'stop banging on about Europe' (Cameron, 2006). His reasoning was that, as alluded to above, for much of the mid-1990s he had witnessed discernible public wrangling creating havoc within the last Conservative government, chiefly over the terms of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty on European integration and in particular its commitment to a 'social chapter' (Forster, 2002). This high watermark 'Euroscepticism'<sup>6</sup> – led by, among others, Michael Howard and John Redwood – had become sufficiently toxic to force the then Prime Minister, John Major<sup>7</sup>, into a 'back me or sack me' vote of confidence on his premiership and did much to discredit the Conservative Party's legitimacy to govern. All of which also thereby helped ease the path for New Labour's landslide election victory in 1997 (Kettle, 2016).

Cameron was determined to learn from this. His opportunity came when – in the wake of the North American financial crisis and the consequent erosion of New Labour's 'hard-won status for economic competence' (Jessop, 2017, p. 35) – the 2010 general election saw the Conservatives as the largest party but without an overall majority. Cameron's pragmatism helped negotiate a Coalition Government with the unashamedly pro-EU Liberal Democrats. *Europe* soon resurfaced though. For the election had bred a new generation of stridently Eurosceptic Tory MPs, many bitterly resentful of the Coalition (Behr, 2011). In October 2011, one of these tabled a motion for a referendum on EU membership resulting in 81 MPs voting against the government. Alongside this, concern over the Eurozone crisis, anxiety in certain localities about immigration from eastern European countries that had gained EU accession in 2004, and, not unrelatedly, an upsurge in electoral support for UKIP – whose *raison d'être* was to withdraw the UK from the EU – had Conservative MPs in marginal constituencies fearing for their futures (Hobolt, 2016). Such political and economic tumult prompted Prime Minister Cameron to countenance a referendum (Watt, 2013). It certainly contravened Coalition policy. But Deputy Prime Minister, Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg, was more fearful of how Cameron's planned action 'could endanger Britain's international position for the next few decades'<sup>8</sup>. Clegg raised his concerns with Cameron, who admitted: 'You may be right. But what else can I do? My backbenchers are unbelievably Eurosceptic and UKIP are breathing down my neck' (in Kettle, 2016).

Impelled by such freight and perhaps too his own purported misgivings on closer European integration (Eaton, 2013), in January 2013 Cameron used a speech at the London headquarters of Bloomberg News to lament the institutional arrangements of the EU as insufficiently nimble to deliver continued prosperity in the wake of the Great Recession and the Eurozone crisis. He intoned about such unease being especially pronounced in

Britain: a country that while eager to join the then *European Economic Community* in 1973 – by which time trade with a shrunken Commonwealth had diminished (Shilliam, 2018) – has come to view with suspicion any deeper *political* integration and where successive EU-wide Treaties bereft of citizen participation have rendered consent for the EU to be ‘wafer thin’ (Cameron, 2013). In light of which Cameron pressed for a *new settlement* premised upon a ‘strong economic base’ facilitated by a single European market but unburdened by ‘excessive regulation’. Most significantly he called for a Union which – given the ‘lack of a single European demos’ (see Mair, 2013) – permits power and democratic accountability to ‘flow back to member states’ and their parliaments. Audaciously confident in his divine capacity to reshape the institutional architecture of the EU, he offered a headline-grabbing commitment:

The next Conservative Manifesto in 2015 will ask for a mandate from the British people for a Conservative Government to negotiate a new settlement with our European partners in the next Parliament. ... And when we have negotiated that new settlement, we will give the British people a referendum with a very simple in or out choice. To stay in the EU on these new terms; or come out altogether. It will be an in-out referendum. ... It is time for the British people to have their say. It is time to settle this European question in British politics (Cameron, 2013).

After his Party somewhat unexpectedly achieved an overall majority in the 2015 General Election<sup>9</sup>, Cameron duly began negotiating this new settlement, promising to achieve significant concessions from Brussels<sup>10</sup> (Hobolt, 2016). The process commenced in June 2015 involving discussions with the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, before culminating in a two-day summit with leaders of the other twenty-seven EU Member States in February 2016 (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whitely, 2017). From this Cameron secured a Treaty change that would enable British exemption from ‘ever closer union’, a guarantee that non-Euro nation states remain exempt from funding any Eurozone bailouts, an ‘emergency safeguard’ to protect the interests of the City of London, and powers to restrict in-work benefits for EU migrants (Jensen & Snaith, 2016). Nonetheless, responses within Cameron’s own Party ranged from lukewarm to hostile: veteran Eurosceptic John Redwood deriding a leaked draft as ‘an insult to the United Kingdom’ before demanding how ‘we need to take back control of our borders and [...] to control our own welfare system’ (Clarke et al., 2017, p. 25). With much of the British press also disparaging, Cameron was in a precarious position trying to ‘sell reforms to a sceptical electorate that clearly wanted more than they were being offered’ (Clarke et al., 2017, p. 26). The settlement was nonetheless ratified on 20 February and on returning from Brussels, the Prime Minister announced the referendum would take place on 23 June 2016.

Cameron himself then proceeded to spearhead the official *Britain Stronger in Europe* campaign. It had the support of the main Westminster political parties, major business groupings, trade unions, and many civil society organizations, and the backing of influential institutions like the International Monetary Foundation and key foreign leaders, including US President Barack Obama. Its principal message was that Britain’s prospective withdrawal from the EU – now termed Brexit – would be a ‘risk not worth taking’ *vis-a-vis* jobs and economic stability<sup>11</sup>. Those working toward a Brexit included *Grassroots Out* and *Leave.EU* (the latter headed by UKIP leader Nigel Farage), both offering strident anti-establishment and anti-immigration messages bordering on a ‘melancholic racialized

nationalism' (Shilliam, 2018). Keen to avoid any 'Farage paradox'<sup>12</sup>, the official *Vote Leave* campaign – fronted by several cabinet Ministers, including Michael Gove and London Mayor, Boris Johnson – were concerned to present the referendum as a unique opportunity to regain democratic sovereignty over Britain's legislature while claiming the country would be 'freer, fairer, and better off outside the EU' (Gove, 2016). Into the final month of campaigning, *Remain* reinforced the narrative of economic risk: on 15 June Chancellor George Osborne declared how the consequences of a *Leave* vote would force an 'emergency budget' comprising tax increases and a further reduction of funding for health and education (Parker & Allen, 2016). Meanwhile, and now adopting the slogan 'Vote Leave: Take Back Control', *Leave* began turning some explicit focus on to immigration<sup>13</sup> (Johnson, 2016), border controls, and EU finances, the latter translated into a now infamous message about fiscal redistribution: 'We send the EU £350 million a week. Let's fund our NHS [National Health Service] instead' (Watkins, 2016, p. 17). Amid a campaign tarnished by fear-mongering, toxic xenophobia, personal defamation, and scandalous bouts of mendacity, the validity of such a claim appeared to matter little (Behr, 2016; Lancaster, 2016; Prentoulis, 2017; Wright, 2017).

In the run-up to the Referendum opinion polls were generally predicting a narrow *Remain* victory. Indeed as polls closed, no public figure appeared to be predicting otherwise. So as the shock result was confirmed, Nigel Farage mixed visible astonishment with delight when proudly proclaiming 23<sup>rd</sup> June to be Britain's 'Independence Day'<sup>14</sup> (Ahmed, 2016; Fraser, 2016). In his brief resignation speech, Cameron confessed that with the people choosing a 'different path ... the country requires fresh leadership to take it in this direction' (Stewart, Mason, & Syal, 2016). Emotions ranged from unbridled joy and hope at the prospect of self-government to panic, anger, sadness, abjection and numbness<sup>15</sup> (Anderson & Wilson, 2018). *The Guardian* journalist, Gary Younge, could be forgiven for imagining he was scripting a farcical political satire while reporting not so much of a 'failed state as a state intent on failure':

One week ago, against the advice of its political establishment, Britain narrowly voted to leave the European Union. Within a few days, that establishment was in the process of a full-scale implosion: the country is effectively without government or opposition, shorn of leadership, bereft of direction. As the pound crashed and markets tanked, the chancellor of the exchequer went missing for three days while Boris Johnson, the most prominent member of the Leave campaign, spent the weekend not sketching out a plan for the nation's future, but playing cricket and writing his column for the Telegraph. Having asserted its right to sovereignty, the country can now find nobody to actually run it (Younge, 2016).

As the markets eventually semi-stabilized, the people of Britain endeavoured to come to terms with a suddenly transformed political landscape. And finally – notwithstanding some absurd posturing from Johnson and Gove – on 13 July the Conservative Party appointed the Home Secretary, Theresa May, as the UK Prime Minister. Her inaugural speech as PM was particularly notable for its underlining of inequality and a sense of 'burning injustice' as being at the heart of why people defied the establishment to vote for Brexit (Doherty, 2016).

### 3. Brexit as a 'revolt of the regions'? uneven development and England's distressed localities

Look at the map of those results ... those jaw-dropping vote-shares for remain in the centre of the capital: 69 per cent in Tory Kensington<sup>16</sup> and Chelsea; 75 per cent in Camden; 78 per cent in Hackney, contrasted with comparable shares for leave in such places as Great Yarmouth (71 per cent), Castle Point in Essex (73 per cent), and Redcar and Cleveland (66 per cent). Here is a country so imbalanced it has effectively fallen over (Harris, 2016).

Those on the remain side who felt they didn't recognise their own country when they woke up on Friday morning [on the 24 June 2016] must spare a thought for the pensioner in Redcar or Wolverhampton who has been waking up every morning for the last 30 years, watching factories close and businesses move while the council cuts back services and foreigners arrive, wondering where their world has gone to (Younge, 2016).

Public consciousness about a divided UK is not peculiar to the Brexit result. Victorian Britain continues to remain synonymous with unspeakable inequality. Relatively more recently, the late 1980s witnessed concerns about a wealthier 'southern' England pulling away from the rest of the UK *vis-a-vis* a widening 'North-South divide' or a Thatcherite 'Two-Nations' state project (Jessop et al., 1988; Lewis & Townsend, 1989). Political economic restructuring through a selective 'rationalization' and privatization of key industrial sectors – early steps in the conjunctural neoliberalization of the UK (Hall, 2011) – saw numerous towns and cities in the 'northern periphery' alongside some erstwhile 'manufacturing heartlands' in the midlands subjected to a 'rapid and sustained geography of deindustrialization' (Martin, 1989, p. 30). This helped precipitate a 30 per cent reduction in manufacturing employment between 1979 and 1987. In pursuing restrictive monetary policies, the Thatcher governments also further squeezed investment in manufacturing-dependent regions while stimulating the financial and banking sectors located primarily in the southeast, especially following the 1986 'big bang' deregulation of the City (Martin, 1989, p. 46). Thatcherism therefore intensified economic, geographical, social, and indeed political divisions between the south and the rest of the UK (Hudson & Williams, 1995). As the scale of regional inequality modified after the early 1990s recession, the debt-fuelled economic boom that ensued between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s allied to New Labour's (at times stealthily presented) redistributive policies helped reduce overall levels of poverty (Joyce & Sibieta, 2013). It is further estimated that over the decade state-funded jobs in the public *and* private sectors accounted for 73 per cent of employment growth in the Northeast, 67 per cent in Yorkshire and Humberside, and 62 per cent in the North-west, helping boost relative output per head in northern regions (Hazeldine, 2017).

And yet New Labour's Third Way vision to blend a neo-liberalizing economy with a reformed social state (Hall, 2003) failed to reduce *overall inequality* (Joyce & Sibieta, 2013). This was primarily a consequence of dramatically hiked rewards for the rich<sup>17</sup>, with London a seemingly irresistible wealth magnet (Massey, 2007), remaining so even in the aftermath of the financial crash. Indeed when compared to the UK average (UK = 100), GDP per capita in Greater London rose from 152 in 1998 to 172 in 2013: the equivalent in Wales was 101 in 1998 tumbling to 72 by 2013 while the northeast figure reduced from 85 to 74 (Martin, Pike, Tyler, & Gardiner, 2016). Putting this into context, average household incomes in Wales, Northern Ireland and the northern regions of England stood

at 60 per cent of those in Greater London; and only in London and the south-east were earnings – when adjusted for inflation – at a higher level in 2016 than they were ten years previously (Elliott, 2017). Indeed since 2007 wage inequality in the UK has grown more than any other country in the EU while real wages have fallen more than anywhere except Greece (Le Galès, 2016). It is no surprise therefore that across the EU 27 countries Britain stands apart as the most imbalanced economy and unevenly developed socio-economic landscape (Martin et al., 2016): output per head a staggering ‘eight times higher in inner west London [*which includes Kensington and Chelsea mentioned by Harris above*] than in west Wales and the Valleys, the largest difference to be found in any EU member state from Bantry Bay to the Dniester’ (Hazeldine, 2017, p. 67).

In conjuncture with all this, the political strategy undertaken by the 2010–2015 Coalition government to impose a programme of austerity – ‘an excuse to dismantle social programs’ (Krugman, 2012) – rather than one of state-backed investment inevitably led to a fiscal starvation of provincial regional economies. It resulted in a drastic cut of 14 per cent in the public-sector workforce of England’s North East: a merciless approach particularly given how, amid the frenzy of the North Atlantic financial crisis, New Labour had intervened with public money to save Britain’s major banks while facilitating the Bank of England to feed ‘quantitative easing’, in effect boosting the London job market by 18 per cent while further enhancing the lavish spending power of the capital’s über-rich (Gordon, 2018; Hazeldine, 2017). Further, through punitive cuts in tax credits and housing and disability benefits alongside savage reductions in local government funding (Toynbee & Walker, 2017), the austerity state has impacted disproportionately on people in older industrial areas, jaded seaside resorts, and now by-passed towns such that ‘by 2016, there were causes enough for a protest vote’ (Callinicos, 2017; Watkins, 2016, p. 10). The seaside resort of Blackpool, with a population of 140,000, is a case in point. At the turn of the millennium it had been muted by New Labour ministers as a potential casino mecca, a ‘Las Vegas of the north’ (Ahmed & Mathiason, 2002). But this failed to materialize, and in recent years its local authority has been forced to endure the highest rates of reduction in governmental welfare spending anywhere in the UK (Neville, 2016). As years of suspended optimism eventually mutated into disappointment and despondency, 68 per cent of those who cast a vote in the EU referendum did so for Leave, the most decisive figure in the North West region.

While *Remain* achieved respectability in the North West’s two major cities – Liverpool at 58 per cent and Manchester at 60 per cent – and albeit more marginally in Leeds, Yorkshire, and Newcastle in the North East, out of 72 constituent areas in the north, less than a dozen heeded the warnings of the *Britain Stronger in Europe* political-cultural elite that a vote to leave the EU would leave northern England more ‘economically and politically marginalized’ (Clarke et al., 2017, p. 44). Indeed what the referendum map of England reveals is how the spaces of *Remain* in the North and Midlands are akin to exposed islands: such that when Manchester City is joined by its satellite towns – including Oldham at 61 per cent Leave and Wigan at 64 per cent – then Greater Manchester translates into an overall *Leave* majority (Hazeldine, 2017). Sharpening the focus more, while reporting on the referendum from Manchester, John Harris (2016) revealed the contrast between people in the hard-pressed district of Collyhurst on the city’s northern edge, who were all planning to vote Leave – one stating that ‘if you’ve got money, you vote in, if you haven’t got money, you vote out’ – and others congregated only ten minutes away at a

graduate recruitment fair: for here nine out of ten people were planning to vote Remain, one young graduate proclaiming how ‘in the end, this is the 21st century, get with it’. Harris confessed his own discomfort, not just about the crushing inequality but also about ‘the sulphurous whiff of ... a kind of misshapen class war’. To be sure, these congregations may have been situated within a mile and a half of each other but their respective worlds are very far apart (Fraser, 2016).

As mentioned earlier, it was the two Midlands regions that recorded the highest proportions for Leave at 59 per cent: the cities of Wolverhampton, Nottingham, and Birmingham with majorities, while the town of Boston at 76 per cent – and with relatively high numbers of migrants from eastern Europe and consequently a target for UKIP – recorded the highest *Vote Leave* in the UK. And in the northern regions – where turnout was between five and ten percentage points up on recent general elections – Yorkshire and Humberside and the North East had percentages of 58 and the North West a relatively lower 54. Northern towns like Hull, Rotherham, and Barnsley voted Leave by over 65 per cent while decisive majorities were recorded across the Pennine ex-mill towns of Burnley, Bury, and Bradford as well as former coal-mining strongholds in south Yorkshire like Doncaster and Wakefield (Watkins, 2016). Aside from Newcastle, urban areas on the rivers Tyne, Tees, and Wear also paid little attention to the *Remain* camp’s steadfast forewarning of an impending economic apocalypse: Stockton-on-Tees was 60:40 Leave while two former bastions of ship-building – Sunderland and Hartlepool – voted decisively for Leave as did the steel-towns of Middlesbrough and Redcar-Cleveland<sup>18</sup> (Hazeldine, 2017). Larry Elliott, *The Guardian* economics editor was in little doubt as to why:

... old industrial Britain is still suffering from the consequences of the closure of factories and pits three or four decades ago. These communities have higher levels of unemployment and higher concentrations of people on disability benefit, and have suffered much more grievously from government welfare cuts. Unsurprisingly, they were also strongly in favour of leave. North of the line that runs from the Severn estuary to the Wash, Brexit was the culmination of a 40-year process of de-industrialisation and casualisation of work. It was a protest about dead-end jobs, and about run-down communities being lorded over by London, talked down to and bossed around (Elliott, 2017).

An analogous assessment was provided by the former Labour Chancellor and Prime Minister, Gordon Brown (2016), who contended that ‘[I]t was a revolt of the regions – northern industrial towns hit by wave after wave of crushing global change – that pushed the Brexit vote over the edge’<sup>19</sup> (see also Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Shilliam, 2018). Perhaps then it was no coincidence that nine months prior to the EU referendum, the major steelworks at Redcar – containing the second largest blast furnace in Europe – was closed precipitating a loss of 3,000 jobs following a calamitous withdrawal of investment from the Thai multinational SSI (Beer, 2018). Given how the Conservative government – recently elected in May 2015 – showed so little appetite to intervene on behalf of the plant and the workers, it was little wonder the community began drawing unfavourable comparisons with the UK state’s earlier willingness to bail out the banking sector following the 2008–2009 financial crisis. Indeed, as outlined by the economist Ann Pettifor:

... Re-regulating the British economy in favour of finance and enriching the 1 per cent while shrinking labour’s share of income resulted in rising inequality and lit a still smouldering fuse of popular resentment ... Resentment made most explicit in the Brexit vote (Pettifor, 2017, pp. 129–130).

Relating closely to this, Allan Cochrane has recently demonstrated the prescience of Doreen Massey's writings for understanding the Brexit conjuncture. For in her 2007 book, *World City*, Massey envisioned how 'the overwhelming concentration of the very wealthy into London [and] the South-East sharpens the inequality [...] within the country [while their] geographical concentration into a self-referential echo chamber reinforces the distance from the rest of us' (Massey, 2007, p. 66; Cochrane, 2018, pp. 194–195). Developing Massey's ideas further, Cochrane underlines the corrosive effect of this concentrated economic geography on housing costs within London and beyond just as many of London's flagship projects are championed to have a 'national' priority: all of which serves 'to reinforce a political agenda which includes a commitment to deregulation and an emphasis on the "untouchability" of the financial sector and a drive towards privatization of various sorts' (Cochrane, 2018, p. 192; also Atkinson, Parker, & Burrows, 2017). It is a political agenda actively enabled via the principal sites of the national state – Whitehall, Parliament, judiciary, financial – strategically incorporating a social base of economic actors in the service of a neoliberal accumulation regime that privileges interest-bearing financial capital at the expense of capital in the production of tradeable commodities: a process that accelerates the uneven development of the UK space economy leaving a London super-class over-compensated while much of the north and midlands nurses renewed scars of deindustrialization (Bachmann & Sidaway, 2016; Elliott, 2017; Hazeldine, 2017; Jessop, 2018a; King & Le Galès, 2017; Martin et al., 2016). Thus, as Cochrane contends, any notion that Brexit resulted from the votes of those 'left behind' by globalization demands an appreciation of geographical uneven development: a process whereby the capitalist search for high-yielding profit inheres a dynamic and inconstant 'locational see-saw' type movement (Smith, 1982) between those places of development or 'growth' and under-development or 'decline'; the conclusion of which is that, for many people:

voting to leave the EU was also a way of voting against the effects of uneven development driven through an economic and political system focused on London and the needs of its elites (Cochrane, 2018, p. 195).

#### 4. Explaining the 'capital of Brexit': economic abandonment and political disaffection in Stoke-on-Trent

Stoke-on-Trent is not so much hollowing out as it is filling up with contrasts. ... And perhaps that shouldn't surprise us. The populist victories of 2016 were, after all, close; only slightly over half of the Britons who voted chose to leave the European Union, while slightly under half of the Americans who voted chose Trump as president. These were not decisive rejections of globalization. The complaints are not about openness to the world and the economic gains it has brought *but about their uneven distribution*. A place like Stoke, with its 69 percent vote for Brexit, may just have more to complain about than most (Morris, 2017; emphasis added).

The decent jobs, which once gave people dignity, have trickled away – replaced by insecure, poorly paid work in services and distribution. The pubs, the labour clubs and the mutual societies that tethered these working communities together – that's gone too. For decade, after decade, after decade, the working men and women of Stoke-on-Trent felt forgotten. But Brexit changed all that (Reverend Geoff Eze, 2017).

The city of Stoke-on-Trent (often abbreviated to Stoke) was created in 1910 as a polycentric federation of six erstwhile separate towns, namely Burslem, Fenton, Hanley, Longton, Stoke, and Tunstall. It is located 'betwixt and between' the West Midlands and North West, and in turn the more illustrious cities of Birmingham and Manchester (Rice, 2010), and represents an archetypal tale of the rise and the traumatic decline of a resource-based urban economy. At the heart of this was the North Staffordshire coalfield, dating back to the thirteenth century alongside the flourishing of clay pottery during the eighteenth century giving rise to small towns with 'pot-banks' and densely settled housing (Beaver, 1964). And while the industrial revolution expanded the scope for mining and facilitated the origins of local steel-making, it was ceramics that imposed 'a distinctive landscape and a seemingly indelible identity onto the region' (Jayne, 2004, p. 200) alongside its moniker *The Potteries* (Edensor, 2001). By the mid-nineteenth century, the city-region was producing 90 per cent of British pottery and 70 per cent of the worldwide market for exported ceramics – including emblematic brands like Wedgwood and Royal Doulton – to the extent that sixty per cent of employees in Stoke worked in pottery manufacture (Imrie, 1991). The expansion and local dominance of pottery continued into the twentieth century. And by the end of the 1920s, female employees in the industry outnumbered male by two to one<sup>20</sup>; although this being a time when women under thirty were still being denied the right to vote, their wages were often significantly lower than those of male colleagues (Imrie, 1989, 1991).

The period following the Second World War is widely characterized as a Fordist 'long boom' with unprecedented economic growth in the developed countries, propelled not least by light manufacturing and consumer goods (Aglietta, 1979). Of course, such development was highly uneven, and like many parts of industrial Britain (Hudson, 1989; Hudson & Williams, 1995), Stoke did not much feature as a site for these propulsive Fordist sectors, bar nominal exceptions like Michelin Tyres (Imrie, 1991). This was partly a consequence of not being designated a *Development* or *Intermediate Area*: a status for which local politicians and planners did campaign, but at that time unemployment levels and indices of socioeconomic 'deprivation' were not comparable with places like Clydeside or the Birmingham conurbation (Ball, 1993). In due course, however, Stoke's dependence upon long-established industries was to have catastrophic consequences. During the 1960s a succession of mergers led to 7000 job losses in pottery. Further, as nationalized industries 'rationalized' in the face of international competition (Hudson, 1986), a technological 'upgrade' in the North Staffordshire coalfields precipitated 13,000 redundancies between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s while the steel plant at Shelton<sup>21</sup> – which employed 3400 in 1967 – was closed in 1980 following a bitter labour dispute (Imrie, 1991). The harrowing aftermath of the 1970s economic crisis also devastated the pottery industry, as between 1978 and 1981 thirty-six factories closed and 10,000 jobs shed (Imrie, 1989). Given how 80 per cent of Stoke's pottery was exported overseas, the high exchange rates that emerged between 1979 and 1980 – a consequence of the 1979 Thatcher government's unbending commitment to monetarism, deflation, and expenditure cuts – were effectively a death warrant. Of course, its traditional industrial form, relatively northern location and support for the Labour Party rendered Stoke to be dislocated from the core social base of the Thatcherite 'two-nations' project (Jessop et al., 1988).

During the 1980s and 1990s Stoke became a primary victim of the state-orchestrated decimation of manufacturing alluded to earlier. While this was partly offset by a rise in retail, distribution, and warehousing, the net outcome resulted in lower productivity, increased unemployment and a surplus of skilled workers in low-skilled, low-paid, and often part-time employment (Ball, 1993). Not that this qualified Stoke for regional assistance, as Thatcher's ideological antipathy to state intervention saw regional policy 'streamlined' to become part of a new 'enterprise initiative' (Martin, 1989). The latter hastened a profusion of agencies like Enterprise Trusts, Business Links, and Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) with boards dominated by local business interests feverishly coaxed to nurture local enterprise (Peck, 1995). Staffordshire TEC thereby began supplying a 'flexible' workforce for a low value-added services economy (Jones, 1998). And recent decades have witnessed a revolving door of 'regeneration' agencies: New Labour creations *Advantage West Midlands*<sup>22</sup> and the *North Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership*<sup>23</sup> abolished by the Coalition Government in favour of a *Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Enterprise Partnership* (Crowley, Balam, & Lee, 2012) Toynbee and Walker (2017, p. 78). characterize such Local Enterprise Partnerships as 'specimens of the administrative exotica created by ministers who would rather do nothing but can't get away with it. [And further as ...] committees of business people who give grants to ... local business people' with conveniently opaque financial arrangements. Relatedly, with Stoke's productivity the fourth lowest in England and wages four-fifths the national average (CSC, 2017), evidence points toward a significant 'corporate welfare' subsidizing private firms who return the favour with lower wages and little enhancement in training and skills (Farnsworth, 2015). Not that such corporate welfare has been sufficient to prevent Wedgwood outsourcing its ceramics production to Indonesia, something that has:

... left the workers, many of whom came from families that had worked in the potteries over three generations, feeling abandoned and betrayed by an industry that appeared indifferent to what closing the factories entailed: the destruction of its workers' way of life (Evans, 2017, p. 215).

These feelings of disappointment and abandonment as long embedded local corporations sought profit maximization via alternative spatial divisions of labour (Massey, 1984) are mirrored somewhat in local politics. And in conjunctural terms, the antagonisms in each 'fused into a ruptural unity' (Hall, Critcher, et al., 2013) when seeking to explain the volume of support for Brexit in Stoke-on-Trent. While Labour has held all three Stoke-on-Trent Westminster seats since 1950, it lost Stoke South to the Conservative candidate in the 2017 election. Moreover, in local government the sustained hegemony of the Labour Party also ended with the election of an Independent Mayor in 2002 (Jayne, 2012). And while the Mayoral system itself was short-lived<sup>24</sup>, the Labour Party's failure to revive Stoke's economic fortunes alongside some limited success for councillors representing the avowedly racist British National Party has left it struggling to regain its legitimacy to govern the city. Reporting on the 2016 EU referendum – this time from Stoke – John Harris (2017) identified that while local Labour Party members may have been campaigning in numbers for *Remain*, '*Leave* was doing a brisk trade among not just white voters but also British-Asian people'; and that furthermore there 'was a sense of a long-dormant political relationship between party and people that had now reached the point of an indifference tinged with bitterness'.

Perhaps such indifference had been exacerbated by the ‘parachuting in’ of the author, academic, telegenic face, and New Labour apparatchik Tristram Hunt as MP for Stoke Central in 2010. Either way, in the aftermath of the Brexit result, Hunt resigned his seat to become Director of the *Victoria and Albert Museum*, which many interpreted as a return to his elite metropolitan sanctuary. Nonetheless, in his resignation letter, Hunt (2017) wrote affectingly about witnessing ‘Detroit-style’ poverty and inequality whereby one in twelve (7,235) of the city’s private homes remain empty. Hunt’s resignation initiated a by-election in February 2017. And it was Stoke’s very status as the UK city with the highest Brexit majority that prompted Paul Nuttall, who had replaced Nigel Farage as UKIP leader, to contest the vacated seat. Although from Merseyside, Nuttall was at pains to convince local people he had ‘more in common’ with them than Mr Hunt, and with promises to reduce immigration<sup>25</sup> and prioritise public housing for local people, he bellowed:

I can be a voice for Stoke. Stoke was the capital of Brexit. On February 23 it can be the capital of change. It can’t be right that 60,000 people in Stoke-on-Trent live on the breadline (Paul Nuttall, 23 January, 2017; cited in Bounds, 2017).

Nuttall lost the by-election to the Labour Party candidate Gareth Snell, but picked up one-quarter of the votes pushing the Conservatives into third place. Like many MPs across the UK, Snell represents a constituency facing enormous challenges. There are spaces of hope. On a return visit, *Guardian* journalist, John Domokos (2018a, 2018b), revealed the acumen, energy and imagination of citizens from many backgrounds, including artists, youth leaders, and those who elevated Stoke into contention for UK City of Culture 2021. What remains of the potteries are now taking on ceramics workers again. And there is a renewed emphasis on further education meeting the aspirations of local communities in a ‘post-Brexit’ economic landscape (Stoke on Trent College, 2018). But such well-springs of optimism cannot mask how the metropolitan landscape of Stoke is enduring a catastrophic fallout from prolonged austerity: many constituents remain in poorly rewarded work – 16,000 are on Employment Support Allowance – and thousands endure poor health and are dependent upon Incapacity Benefit. In turn, since June 2018, 25 per cent of Stoke’s population have been adversely affected by changes in Universal Credit, estimated to be evacuating £73 million per year from the local economy (CSC, 2017). Phil Corrigan, political correspondent at the *Stoke Sentinel*, believes the appeal for Brexit in the city relates to a wider malaise:

There is a general disaffection with politics ... Membership of the EU has coincided with four decades of decline in Stoke that started in the 1970s. They [the voters] conflated two things. They thought, ‘maybe if we can break free from the EU there is a chance we can get our industry back’ (cited in Bounds, 2017).

Yet at the same time the Stoke-based *British Ceramic Confederation* pleads for tariff-free access to the single market (Toynbee, 2017). Like everywhere throughout the UK, the intricate anomalies of Brexit become increasingly evident with each passing day.

## 5. The austerity state in a Brexit conjuncture: governmental discord and the ‘exhaustion of consent’

The simple choice proposed in the referendum campaign enabled the Brexiteers, to their own surprise in many cases, to call forth and energize a large and increasingly volatile section of

the electorate that had previously been alienated from politics often by reason of 30 years of growing inequality and powerlessness but were now determined to make their voices heard. What had been disagreement within the elite, within the ‘Westminster bubble’ was now out in society as a whole, creating a new and uncertain situation for the foreseeable future (Morgan, 2016, p. 828).

Here, in Jaywick, we are on the edge of the English land mass, but we also appear to be on the edges of government and the state (John Harris, in Harris and Domokos, 2014).

Among numerous anomalies or paradoxical characteristics of the Brexit result (Clarke & Newman, 2017) was the revelation that many less prosperous localities in the UK whose communities voted to leave the EU are precisely those most dependent upon its single market for trade while also being beneficiaries of EU Cohesion Policy support over several decades (Los, McCann, Springford, & Thissen, 2017; McCann, 2018). A notable instance concerns people in the city of Sunderland in the north east whose futures are highly dependent on the Nissan car factory and its access to a tariff-free EU market but who yet voted in favour of the UK exiting the EU. As McCann (2018) acknowledges, most observers would deem such behaviour to be ostensibly quite irrational. It is also at odds with previous referenda which have tended to favour the status quo option, particularly if the outcome is seen to place in jeopardy the economic security of voters (Clarke et al., 2017). And it may well have been with the latter uppermost in mind that the *Britain Stronger In Europe* campaign embarked upon a sustained bombardment of detailed statistics from a range of organizations – including the Bank of England, the Confederation of British Industry, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies – about how Brexit would be catastrophic for the national economy while also placing many jobs at risk. It is now widely assumed, however, that such coolly reasoned macroeconomic logic lacked resonance with the lived experiences and consciousness of many voters (Airas, 2017; Closs Stephens, 2016; Freedland, 2017; Marr, 2016). It is a disjuncture encapsulated in a public meeting in Newcastle just prior to the referendum, when a warning from one panellist of how a Brexit vote might lead to slower GDP prompted an audience member to react with: ‘That’s your bloody GDP, not mine’<sup>26</sup>. It was a response that:

... neatly epitomized not only an increasingly cynical attitude towards expertise, but more specifically, a belief that, whilst pro-Remain politicians might not necessarily be lying, they were describing a reality from another planet (the prosperous South-East). ... hence talk of economic recovery from the financial crisis was liable to be met with laughter outside of the M25. Equally, while the aggregate economic impact of immigration has been positive, statements to that effect failed to convince people on the wrong side of the economic fence, or who saw (or thought they saw) increases in migrant numbers directly impacting on their daily lives (Evans & Menon, 2017, pp. 62–63).

There is little denying that the groundswell for Vote Leave was about material inequality, further evidenced by the 2017 *Social Mobility Commission* report which revealed 60 of the 65 most disadvantaged areas as having voted Leave<sup>27</sup> (Behr, 2017). However, as alluded to above, it also related to a growing sense of disconnect between citizens and the institutions of government. Not least in that ministerial auto-cued assurances about a purported post-crash economic recovery and GDP rates increasingly translate as remote abstractions which just do not square with the *experience* of rising living costs, with the pressure of performing three part-time jobs while organizing a household and on occasion reluctantly using a food bank, or perhaps being among the one quarter of families where 21–34

year olds live with their parents (Froud, Johal, & Williams, 2016). And here – in an echo the 1980s north-south divide and its broad-brushed representation of inequality (Lewis & Townsend, 1989) – so our analytical focus on Brexit’s geography being primarily about a ‘revolt’ of distressed localities in the north and midlands of England becomes over-reached. For while remain majorities were certainly registered in Bristol and wealthier towns in the south such as Bath, Reading, and Windsor, these were offset by the ex-industrial ports of Dover, Plymouth and Portsmouth, retirement resorts like Bournemouth and Eastbourne, ex-fishing towns such as King’s Lynn and Great Yarmouth (both above 70 per cent Leave), alongside the Thames estuary, where Thurrock, Basildon and Clacton-on-Sea were all around 70 per cent in favour of Leave.

Indeed nowhere reveals the scale of uneven development that has ripped the United Kingdom asunder in recent decades more than the seaside village of Jaywick. Sitting on the Essex coast two miles from Clacton and only 60 miles from central London, it is the most ‘deprived’ council ward in England, described by one commentator as ‘a fractured, broken place’ (Rodger, 2016). In 2014, journalists John Harris and John Domokos visited Jaywick as one of several places that had been witnessing a notable upsurge in support for UKIP. Drawing parallels with the discussion of Stoke-on-Trent, they uncover a socio-political landscape punctuated by ‘poverty, anger and the breakdown of normal politics’ just as their engagement with residents exposed an overwhelming sense of disaffection for mainstream Westminster parties, one respondent urging politicians to ‘start listening to the people who vote for you’. It was a context within which Nigel Farage’s UKIP – a free-market and anti-state ‘force made up largely of Tory exiles [but which] has managed to style itself as a party for the working class’ – endeavoured to promote its nativist appeals to ‘patriotism’ and anti-immigration (Shilliam, 2018). Certainly it was difficult to imagine the *Britain Stronger In Europe* message being anything other than ridiculed among Jaywick residents (Vidal, 2016). Despondency of this sort finds resonance in ethnographic work conducted by McKenzie (2017a; 2017b). For she uncovers how – in discussing their plans to vote Leave while also openly conscious of how their views would be derided by the political elite and metropolitan commentariat – working class female communities in East London and ex-mining towns of Nottinghamshire internalize a sense not just of being ‘left behind’ but of not being listened to and indeed of ‘not existing’. It is in this context that a prescient paper published in advance of the Brexit referendum might offer crucial insights to help comprehend this *exhaustion of consent* for the neoliberal political economic mainstream (cf. Hall, Critcher, et al., 2013), and of:

... the very real sense of democratic and political disenfranchisement that is experienced in [many] constituencies ... that finds expression in one of two ways: as simple apathy and non-participation; or as organised opposition to UK membership of the EU and support for the virtual ending of mass immigration. This combination of policies propelled UKIP into third place in the national vote, and represents a complex set of implicit and explicit demands, which are not solely motivated by old-fashioned racism, xenophobia and conservative authoritarianism. Hostility to the EU, and to patterns of migration which appear to transform their communities and localities without any consultation with them, can also be understood as, in part, expressions of frustration with the lack of meaningful democratic participation (Gilbert, 2015, pp. 39–40).

More than this, though, as Clarke and Newman incisively identify, Gilbert’s analysis of a ‘post-democratic feeling’<sup>28</sup> uncovers many of the social forces that appeared to have been mobilized in the Vote Leave campaign, and which on 23 June 2016 ‘fused into a ruptural

unity’ (Hall, Critcher, et al., 2013, p. xv). It is, moreover, in this regard that their invoking of a conjunctural approach reaps reward in disclosing the diversity of contradictory forces, the culturally inflected processes of anxiety and revulsion, alongside ostensibly illogical choices. Thus:

Despite the temptations of identifying the one ‘real’ cause, conjunctural analysis invites us to think about how various lines of force [...] intersected with the fracturing of apparently established governmental and political formations (from the crises of the European Union to the disuniting of the United Kingdom). These lines of force were recombined in new articulations and found new voicings that promised to overcome the failures and frustrations, as well as the contradictions and antagonisms of the existing arrangements (Clarke & Newman, 2017, pp. 112–113).

This approach enabled Clarke and Newman to analyse the sizeable support for and decisive impact of Vote Leave among middle-class voters (Chakraborty, 2016). Not least in how the widespread assumption that the UK middle classes were characterized by a cosmopolitan liberalism somehow inevitably prompting them to vote Remain” omits from the overall frame how Brexit was supported by a traditional ‘middle class in the suburbs, small towns, and shires that remained resolutely “non-cosmopolitan” and were apparently consumed by immigration anxiety (despite such spaces not being occupied by many migrants)’ (Clarke & Newman, 2017, p. 106)<sup>29</sup>. This finding facilitates a clearer vision of how fractions of the Leave campaign could exploit the potent combination of an erosion of disaffected consent allied to immigration anxiety: ‘structures of feeling (Williams, 1977) which in turn were duly intensified via populist ventriloquism from Gove, Johnson, and Farage, each distinguishing themselves from the metropolitan ‘cosmopolitan’ elite<sup>30</sup> fronting *Remain*, while claiming to speak for ordinary people’s sense of loss (as in for example, the ‘great’ in Great Britain), of betrayal and growing sense of abandonment, and to offer promises about ‘taking back control’ (over borders) and ‘put the country back in charge of our destiny’<sup>31</sup> (Clarke & Newman, 2017). This struggle around the organic order of British societal values and identity (Jessop, 2018a) is superbly encapsulated in Craig Calhoun’s assessment of how:

Brexit is an expression of English – more than British – nationalism and is part of a decades-long decline in British unity. But the England that wants out of Europe is the England of vanished industry in the north, rural poverty in the southwest and people clinging to middle-class lifestyles in the suburbs of once-great cities that feel increasingly alien to them (Calhoun, 2016, p. 52).

This decline in unity is paralleled in discord at the heart of the post-referendum state as David Cameron’s petulant endeavour to ‘put to bed’ the Europe question has wreaked untold havoc. It is worth reflecting on how his government unashamedly offered state privileges to business interests and financial elites (Hutton & Adonis, 2018; Wright, 2017): and yet this elite failed to cohere in support of his Remain campaign thereby enabling those on the Leave campaign to exploit this crisis of political authority (Jessop, 2018a; 2018b). Indeed as Morgan contends, the Brexit conjuncture witnessed ideological divisions within an elite that, while generally supportive of further adherence to a neoliberal accumulation regime, had alternative views about how it might be successfully advanced in the UK context. However, crucially, these divisions ‘had not only come to the surface but had also [in turn] activated a broad mass of the population’ (Morgan, 2016, p. 828). Furthermore, given how successive governments had offered unequivocal support for private over

public interests – not least through the Private Finance Initiative (Crouch, 2011) – while squeezing welfare and then imposing austerity, this was a *broad mass* whose own consent had been eventually exhausted. It was also a mass whose respect for the words or aspirations of a remote political elite had eroded just as it had persistently found its own institutions of support and representation decimated (Beynon & Hudson, 2018; Jessop, 2018a). King and Le Galès (2017) contend that the populist eruptions of recent years are also seeing a growing disconnect between the state and the nation, especially given how so many citizens feel disenchanted with the former: but this is surely intensified in a country whose crisis-ridden state presides over four separate nations, two of whom now feel angrily unrepresented by the result of the Brexit referendum result.

After becoming Prime Minister, Theresa May's approach to negotiating a credible path to extricate the UK from the EU was to become synonymous with banal agreement-stalling statements such as 'Brexit Means Brexit' and 'No Deal is Better than a Bad Deal', at least before the key document, Article 50,<sup>32</sup> was triggered in March 2017. After which May called an election in June, presumably designed to secure a further full term of 'strong and stable' Conservative rule. But this backfired spectacularly, and in order for legislation to be passed, her government now depends on the votes of the Northern Ireland ultra-right Democratic Unionist Party. And while the election result signified a partial return by voters to the two main parties, the extent to which either might generate the social base of support required to foster a hegemonic political project is questionable. Not least in that the referendum has exposed a major disjuncture between the parties and socio-political and geographical divisions: for just as three-quarters of constituencies held by the Conservative Party voted for Brexit so too did nearly two-thirds of Labour-held seats (Clarke et al., 2017; Grey, 2016; Lanchester, 2016). More than this, though, Brexit has quite simply been placing enormous pressure on the basic functioning of the British state (Runciman, 2016). Indeed the business of everyday government often appears at a standstill (Behr, 2018; Williams, 2018; Younge, 2018). New policies seem incapable of being formulated late alone announced. Ministers who under normal circumstances would be held to account for extraordinary mismanagement remain in post. It also took until July 2018 for the Cabinet to develop a full proposal to initiate a Brexit agreement: the so-called Chequers proposal. At the time of writing, it has led to two Cabinet resignations by notable Brexiteers, while the terms which propose a single market for goods but not services quite palpably contravene the principles of the EU while also leaving unresolved the biggest anomaly of all: the border between the EU and Northern Ireland (Hayward, 2018). Meanwhile there is a scandalous failure to even begin addressing the very economic and social inequities and the sources of discontent that generated the Brexit revolt in the first place (Ryan, 2018; Dorling, 2018).

## Notes

1. In the UK the working class comprises 46 per cent of the population vis-a-vis social groups C2, D, and E, with the middle classes categorized as A, B, and C1 (Clarke et al., 2017).
2. The five regions with the largest aggregate votes in rank order were the South East, London, North West, East, and South West: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36616028>.
3. Notably one of Hall's colleagues was John Clarke himself.
4. These ideas are derived from Gramsci and Althusser (Hall, Critcher, et al., 2013).

5. It is worth noting that this approach to critical inquiry has been central to commentators writing regularly in the journal *Soundings*, particularly in their critique of neoliberalism, the global financial crisis, and austerity.
6. An important seed for this ‘Euroscepticism’ had been planted in 1988 by PM Margaret Thatcher’s speech in Bruges, where she posed the question as to whether the EU was endangering British sovereignty (Shilliam, 2018).
7. Cameron had seen this up close having spent a brief spell as advisor to Major (Kettle, 2016).
8. Clegg in conversation with colleague, David Laws; cited in Kettle (2016).
9. Much speculation surfaced about whether Cameron genuinely believed his Party would achieve a majority in 2015 and thereby be mandated to deliver on the referendum commitment (e.g. Jessop, 2017; Kettle, 2016; McTague, 2016).
10. It is interesting to note that prior to the negotiations at least some of the Prime Minister’s ‘competitiveness’ pitch was embraced by the EU as it began withdrawing almost 300 regulations (Evans & Menon, 2017).
11. Indeed only 24 hours after the PM’s announcement, the CEOs of a third of the FTSE 100 companies signed a letter in *The Times* warning against Brexit (Evans & Menon, 2017).
12. This relates to the apparent irony whereby at the same time as UKIP’s poll rating and membership would rise, support for actually leaving the EU would drop (Katwala, 2014).
13. On May 26, it was announced that official net migration for 2015 was 333,000, three times higher than the government’s target and the second highest on record. On the strength of which Dominic Cummings, director of the *Vote Leave* campaign, is reported to have instructed Johnson and Gove: “If you want to win this, you have to hit Cameron and Osborne over the head with a baseball bat with immigration written on it” (Parker, 2016).
14. As Ahmed (2016) points out this rhetoric of ‘Independence Day’ is deeply insensitive to the lives sacrificed in in the struggles for independence in the US and other ex-colonial nations.
15. For examples, see the essays by Fraser, 2016; Freedland, 2016; Garton Ash, 2016; Harding, 2016; Harris, 2016; Jones, 2016; Marr, 2016; Meek, 2016; Streeck, 2016; Watkins, 2016; Welsh, 2016; Wolf, 2016; and the contributions on “Where Are We Now: Responses to the Referendum” in *London Review of Books*, volume 38:14.
16. Kensington and Chelsea is the local authority boundary: they form two constituencies in national elections. In the 2017 general election, Kensington actually elected a Labour MP for the first time since the constituency was formed in 1974: notably it is the UK constituency with the highest average income and yet is also the most unequal, a geography tragically revealed in the Grenfell Tower atrocity on 14 June 2017 (MacLeod, 2018).
17. Former Cabinet minister, Peter Mandelson, once famously admitted that New Labour was ‘intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich’.
18. All data gathered from the Financial Times EU Referendum results: <https://ig.ft.com/sites/elections/2016/uk/eu-referendum/>.
19. We are left to wonder whether Brown sincerely believes he might have done more during his own tenure to assist these regions in withstanding such waves.
20. At this time, Stoke-on-Trent had the highest rate of female waged employment in the UK (Imrie, 1989, 1991).
21. Both the steelworks and several various coal mines had remained profitable and advanced in technology (Imrie, 1991).
22. New Labour introduced Regional Development Agencies across the nine regions of England.
23. This covered the local authorities of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire Moorlands, and the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent (NSRP, 2008).
24. The Mayoral system only ran from 2002 until a return to Cabinet style government in 2008 (Tappin, 2010).
25. At only 3 per cent, like many places that voted majority Brexit and where immigration from eastern European countries was central to the debate, the percentage of Stoke-on-Trent’s population born elsewhere in the European Union as low.
26. It is worth noting in this context that Froud et al identify how GDP was initially deployed as a quantitative measurement emerging from the economic mobilization waged around World

War II, and thereby question whether it really is the most appropriate way of delineating economic performance in the financialized capitalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

27. In returning to Wales at the time of the Referendum, journalist Dawn Foster sensed that for many people, voting to leave the EU was a “chance to be heard for once, to kick back at Westminster and the vast majority of Welsh MPs who voted to remain in the EU” (Foster, 2016, p. 10).
28. There are resonances here with Colin Crouch’s (2004) earlier work on post-democracy as well as Claus Offe’s (2013) thinking on the emergence of ‘democratic inequality in the austerity state’.
29. While a deep-seated analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting the crucial role of education: 72 per cent without formal educational qualifications voted Leave compared to 35 per cent of those with a university degree. Relatedly, those over-55 – a fifth of the UK population – voted 60:40 in favour of Leave (Watkins, 2016). At the same time it is also worth noting that thirteen million registered voters did not vote in the referendum just as seven million eligible adults were not registered to vote, disproportionately the young, flat-dwellers (especially renters), ethnic minorities, and those recently moving house (Dorling, 2016).
30. As Rafael Behr (2017) notes it is “hard to stomach Brexiter claims to speak on behalf of the have-nots when their campaign was supported by tax-shy millionaires [just as] anti-establishment rhetoric in the mouths of Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg is, by any meaningful social metric, preposterous”.
31. Each of the Leave demagogues have at some stage payed homage to Mrs Thatcher; and there are distant echoes here of how Thatcher often presented her approach by appearing to represent ‘the people’ directly, often against the strong state that she was ironically fostering (see Jessop et al., 1988, p. 83; Jessop, 2017).
32. As Tony Wright (2017) outlines, however, when Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty declares that ‘any Member State may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional arrangements’, Britain – never having established a written Constitution – has difficulty in knowing precisely what its constitutional arrangements are.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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