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Between the 'Left Behind' and 'The People': Racism, Populism and the Construction of Whiteness in the context of Brexit

Neema Begum, Aurelien Mondon, Aaron Winter

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Brexit has commonly been represented as a potential democratic revolt of the so-called 'left behind', defined as both 'white working class' and 'the people'. It has been argued that this 'revolt' had been brewing since the turn of the century, serving as vindication of this very thesis. The election of Donald Trump five months later seemed to confirm the trend – the 'white working class' had awakened to reclaim its democratic standing and make its voice heard. This narrative was well rehearsed. Perhaps most symbolically, Nigel Farage (2016), one of the main protagonists of the Brexit saga, wrote in an opinion piece in *The Telegraph* a month before the US election:

The similarities between the different sides in this election are very like our own recent battle. As the rich get richer and big companies dominate the global economy, voters all across the West are being left behind. The blue-collar workers in the valleys of South Wales angry with Chinese steel dumping voted Brexit in their droves. In the American rust belt, traditional manufacturing industries have declined, and it is to these people that Trump speaks very effectively....

Similar takes became commonplace and reiterated not only by the very actors benefitting from these electoral successes and ideological realignment, but increasingly by their opponents.

Building on a wealth of literature which has demonstrated that such readings are not only inaccurate, but politically dangerous, this chapter aims first to challenge the idea that Brexit was indeed a (white) working-class revolt, and then explore the impact of and underlying ideology behind the construction and perpetuation of such narratives. Our focus will be on racialisation and the construction of the working class and 'the people' as white. First, we turn our attention to representations of Brexit to study more precisely what was represented in the campaign, coverage and subsequent analysis and what was not. We then deconstruct what the 'white working class' narrative is predicated on and its political and ideological function, paying particular attention to the representation of white male victimisation and grievance claims. Finally, we explore what is really at stake in this reactionary backlash and its misleading depiction.

Our argument is that the focus on the white working class has not only racialised and divided the most diverse section of our society, but displaced racism, white supremacy, and Brexit itself onto the working class. In the process, it not only served to exculpate the middle and upper classes and rendered their racism and white supremacy relatively invisible, but allowed elites to serve and protect their own economic and political interests, while appearing to be looking out for the so-called 'legitimate' concerns of the 'left behind'.

Brexit as a white working-class revolt

Developed in relation to growing support for UKIP, which saw the party make significant inroads in the 2014 EU Elections, according to Ford and Goodwin (2014), the 'left behind' are older, less-skilled and less-educated white working-class men who have been left behind by rapid social and economic processes such as globalisation and mass immigration. Economically 'left behind' by deindustrialisation, they were also presented as culturally left behind by multiculturalism and liberal social values. This white, working-class, left behind were also argued to have driven support for Brexit. However, contrary to claims that Brexit and Trump's election were working class revolts, what we witnessed was largely a legitimisation of racism, realignment of the right and resurgence of the far right. Narratives placing so-called 'left-behind' as core to these 'populist' waves served a clear purpose in the discourse of right-wing politicians eager to get a semblance of popular support behind their otherwise elitist and exclusionary platforms. The working-class, whose mythologisation had been constructed over centuries of struggles, hagiography and demonisation proved a particularly potent ally for the far right to claim at a time when it was easy to show that it had been abandoned by the centre left.

Interestingly, this narrative was not simply used by politicians for clear short-term electioneering goals, it was also espoused by many prominent commentators in the media and academia, on both sides of the political spectrum. It was not a surprise to see the right-wing press and commentators exploit the idea: *The Daily Express* talked about a 'working class revolution' (Guttergidge 2016) and *Spiked!*, a right-wing libertarian website, claimed 'The Brexit vote was a revolt against the establishment' (*Spiked!* 2016). However, it was perhaps more unexpected to see the more left-leaning media follow suit. In what represents a fairly typical hot take on Brexit and Trump, Caroline Crampton (2016) wrote in *The NewStatesman* about 'what the working class revolt is really about'. While her analysis was indeed correct that it was race and not economic anxiety that had driven some of the vote for Brexit and Trump, she nonetheless fell for the idea that it was indeed something pushed predominantly by the 'white working class'. John Harris (2016), writing for *The Guardian*, in the aftermath of the referendum, claimed that 'Britain is in the midst of a working-class revolt'. The divide

in British society was clear and simple: 'From ardent leavers in Merthyr Tydfil and undecided people on the English-Welsh borders to university students in Manchester who were 95% for remain, my Guardian colleague John Domokos and I have sampled just about every shade of opinion'. On one side, the white working class of the South Wales Valleys and other depressed industrial areas, on the other, the affluent and educated, predominantly London-based cosmopolitans. Even if Harris admitted that 'to be sure, there are many nuances and complications among leave voters', these nuances were really not worth blurring such a poignant picture:

make no mistake: in an almost comical reflection of the sacred lefty belief that any worthwhile political movement will necessarily be built around the workers, the foundation of the Brexit coalition is what used to be called the proletariat, large swaths of which are as united as in any lefty fantasy, even if some of their loudest complaints are triggering no end of anxiety among bien-pensant types, and causing Labour a great deal of apprehension.

This was music to the ear of *Guardian* readers: solace is to be found in the centre-left middle class rather than the poor, uneducated or oppressed. These trends and narratives have endured and been further fuelled by 'the fall of the red wall' in the 2019 General Election, when traditionally Labour seats in the North turned to the Conservative party, despite evidence that this was not driven by a shift in working class vote to the right (Dorling 2020).

This elite narrative placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the (white) working class was predicated on the populist hype, which by then had gripped much of public discourse across the west (Glynos and Mondon 2016). That this was pushed both by those who thought it was a positive development and those who worried about it as a threat to establishment politics, fed into the racist, nativist, but also anti-elite narrative pushed by the far right, despite being led by and benefiting part of the establishment. For Farage, a former stock broker, Brexit was a victory for 'ordinary people, for good people, for decent people' (Peck 2016), one which confirmed that concerns over immigration, as well as Islam, came first and economic grievances second (Hall and Maddox 2016). Often, the Leave.EU campaign tapped into far right strategies, most notably with its use of a Nazi-esque image of refugees crossing from Croatia to Slovenia in 2015, with a banner reading 'Breaking Point: the EU has failed us all' (Stewart and Mason 2016). It was therefore not surprising to see the far-right rally behind Farage (Lyons 2016). While the Conservative-led Vote Leave was the official campaign for Brexit, the UKIP-led Leave.EU received much coverage as Nigel Farage had been instrumental in leading the agenda on the issue since the 2014 European election.

A number of academic analyses also participated in either reproducing, constructing or informing the narrative. Arguments about the white working class 'left-behind' became common to explain the

resurgence of far right parties as it was argued right-wing populists were able to attract former left-wing voters alienated by the convergence of the mainstream left and right and their focus on the middle class and ethnic minorities (Norris and Inglehart 2019). For Ford and Goodwin (2017), support for Brexit was to be found within the working-class 'left-behind' who fear a loss of order and identity in 'a more diverse and rapidly changing Britain', championed by a homogenised and mythologised, 'multicultural', socially liberal elite.

Despite such widespread and mostly homogenous coverage, claims that Brexit was a working-class revolt are untenable, by any and all standards. According to Danny Dorling (2016), 'of all those who voted for Leave 59% were middle class (A, B and C1), and 41% were working class (C2, D and E)'. Such claims are further dampened when looking at the geography of the vote, with 52% of people who voted Leave living in the southern half of England. For Derek Sayer (2017), the discrepancies between the result in Scotland and Northern Ireland who voted overwhelmingly for remain (62% and 55.8% respectively) and Wales and England who favoured Brexit (52.5% and 53.4%) reinforce the need for a more nuanced approach as 'there is no consistent correlation with income levels across the regions that might help explain these disparities in class terms'. Were it simply a question of class qua income for example, Scotland and Northern Ireland, whose gross disposable income (GDHI) is lower than the UK's average would have been fertile ground for Brexit. Based on similar data, Wales, whose GDHI is lower than all the English regions, returned a stronger remain vote (albeit with a Brexit majority). Out of the top ten Leave districts, only two could be considered working class in the most general understanding of the term, the other eight being either found in rural areas or in depressed seaside and fishing resorts. While the analysis of the vote already provides us with a number of caveats to counter the hegemonic narrative placing the blame firmly on irrational working-class voters for the Brexit decision, the inclusion of abstention as a variable allow us to weaken such generalising claims further (Mondon & Winter 2018; 2020).

Brexit and the 'left-behind': What was the white working class Brexit narrative predicated on?

Key to the narrative pitting Brexit as a popular revolt relies on an ideological definition of 'the people' as an unrepresented population with a grievance and claim to the nation, its past and future, against elites and interlopers. In this case, the ideological definition of the working class is as essentially white and indigenous: 'While the populist character of the campaigns and their portrayal in the mainstream media pitted a constructed 'people' made up of workers against an out-of-touch or contemptuous elite who fails to represent them, its nativist/racist/xenophobic basis pitted whites against classless immigrants, refugees and representatives of multiculturalism and diversity who threaten jobs, resources and nation' (Mondon & Winter 2018). Diversity was often equated with affluence: Leave-

voting areas being characterised as white, working class or 'left behind' while 'multicultural' cities populated with degree-educated, middle-class professionals were presented as being part of the liberal cosmopolitan elite (Hobolt 2016). In this way, ethnic minorities served as a backdrop to the lives of white, liberal middle-class professionals. Working-class ethnic minorities were often erased, despite common and even exacerbated experiences of poverty and precarity with the 'white, working class' (compounded by racial inequality) or they were seen as sharing in the wealth and cultural resources of the white middle classes in cosmopolitan, Remain-supporting towns and cities. The conflation of diversity with affluence and that ethnic minorities (and immigrants) may be part of this 'liberal cosmopolitan elite' conjures accepted notions of white supremacy. It underpins claims of white victimhood, particularly among the white, working-class that ethnic minorities or immigrants are overtaking or even oppressing them. Their whiteness which should, in their eyes, grant privilege, is instead thought of as a liability.

For Virdee and McGeever (2017), 'This racializing nationalism has borne a particularly defensive character since the 2008 crisis. It is defined not by imperial prowess or superiority, but by a deep sense of loss of prestige; a retreat from the damaging impact of a globalised world that is no longer recognisable, no longer British'. This operates through what has been described by Miri Song (2014) as a culture of racial equivalence: this 'post-race' narrative does not negate race or racism, but allows for the discursive placement of whiteness in a position where it has lost its historical power (globally and domestically) and appears thus in decline, vulnerable and subject to victimisation by others. This construction was expressed and mobilised in the context of Brexit and again in response to the toppling of slave trader Edward Colston's statue in Bristol during protests that followed the police killing of George Floyd in 2020. This and protests against other monuments to the legacy of the British Empire and role in slavery, such as that of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford University, were taken to be an attempt to erase British history and former greatness, as well as being 'anti-white'. Despite the elite status of these individuals and some of the institutions their status watch over, the narrative and the identification, if not conflation, of Britishness and whiteness, with the working class, particularly in a globalised, post-industrial and post-colonial era, negates its privilege and renders it the 'people'.

In this context, it has become increasingly accepted that the political divide in British society is no longer between the left and right, with the former being the representative of workers and the latter of the elite. Instead, constructions of the Brexit narratives pushed the idea that the new battle lines were between a cosmopolitan middle class soft left and a more grounded, ethnocentric 'left-behind', eager to return the nation to its heyday. This tapped into David Goodhart's conception of the 'Somewheres' and the 'Anywheres' (2017):

The old distinctions of class and economic interest have not disappeared but are increasingly over-laid by a larger and looser one – between the people who see the world from Anywhere and the people who see it from Somewhere (p.3).

The Anywheres are the urban elite, while the Somewheres ‘have usually ‘ascribed’ identities – Scottish farmer, working class Geordie, Cornish housewife – based on group belonging and particular place, which is why they find rapid change unsettling’. Within the Somewheres, the ‘left-behind’ white working class was particularly hit: these ‘older white working class men with little education have lost economically with the decline of well-paid jobs for people without qualifications and culturally, too, with the disappearance of a distinct working-class culture and the marginalisation of their views in the public conversation’. While there is no doubt that neoliberal globalisation has benefitted a small elite at the expense of most, Goodhart’s ‘frame’ focuses on identity, conveniently whitewashing the fact that those at the sharp end of inequalities are predominantly ethnic and migrant communities, but that they also share far more in common with the so-called ‘white working class’, than with ‘Home Counties market town *Daily Mail* readers’ he associates them with (Goodhart 2017: 4). As Joe Kennedy (2018: 83) points out in his powerful critique of those he terms ‘authentocrats’:

That poor people live in cities, that many provincial working-class people are left-wing (and, vitally, not white) and that more than a few people in supposedly left-behind constituencies are materially well-off is neither here nor there to them.

In Goodhart’s simplistic account, Londoners do not feel a particular attachment to their city or even their particular area of London, nor do other city dwellers; there are no (multi-racial) working-class poor there suffering from unequal access to education, housing and other public services. You would also be forgiven to think that the views of ethnic minorities are less marginalised than that of the white population. Finally, absent from this picture is the large swathes of wealthy England that voted to leave, for both ‘cultural’ and economic reasons, the latter putting those so-called Somewheres most at risk. In this, Goodhart’s approach epitomizes our reactionary moment: his extremely simplistic account conflates wilfully elitist neoliberal politics with their internationalist left-wing opponents, in order to defend the interests and appease the anxiety of the ageing privileged middle and upper classes in the UK. As Gurinder Bhambra (2017: 226) notes, ‘what is being described is a relative loss of privilege rather than any real account of serious and systemic economic decline that is uniquely affecting white citizens’.

As is typical amongst far right legitimisers (Mondon & Winter 2020), Goodhart treads a fine line between the extreme and the mainstream, denouncing the most egregious acts of racism and discrimination, but justifying the more latent aspect of our reactionary moment as if they were

democratic demands, all the while ignoring the existence and reach of systemic racism. His non-racist credentials are strengthened by his claims that some ethnic minorities are Somewheres and have voted for Brexit – which of course ignores the fact that their reasons to vote for Brexit were very different (Begum 2020).

His focus on ‘cultures’, their equal worth, whether native or immigrant, and the necessity to protect all and thus keep them separate is not original either. It is in fact reminiscent of the *Nouvelle Droite’s* approach taken in the 70s and 80s as parts of the extreme right attempted to recalibrate their racist ideology to suit the post-racial hegemony, moving away from blatant biological racism based on the superiority of the white race, towards more cultural forms based on the necessity to protect all cultures and thus prevent mixing (see Bar-On 2013, Mondon 2013). It is no surprise that Goodhart’s work has been praised on *Éléments*, the main *Nouvelle Droite* publication ‘for European Civilisation’. The *Nouvelle Droite’s* approach was based on the reading of Antonio Gramsci, and in particular a belief that to achieve political power, one first needs cultural power. This approach can be witnessed in Goodhart’s approach: the seemingly quaint and inoffensive veneer of the Anywheres and Somewheres cracks in the conclusion in particular where the author provides some leads towards ‘better societies’ which are often reminiscent of far right proposals, if not fascist ones. Goodhart advocates for a clearer and more punitive division of the population between those who really belong and those who don’t, but also between those deserving of the help of a national welfare state and the scroungers. Here, we can see clearly that there is more Thatcherism in the British new right in the 21st century than old-school working-class labour.

While Goodhart was somewhat of a trailblazer in the UK on these issues, a number of prominent academics have pushed similar arguments in recent years, with more or less nuance or ideological ambitions. As others, he has also embraced a euphemisation strategy, calling parties and politics previously widely described as radical or extreme right, or racist, simply populist. This shift towards less stigmatising but also clear and precise terminology was particularly striking in a book by Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2018), in which the authors created an entirely new terminology ‘national populism’ in an attempt to dissociate contemporary movements from their ‘evil’ forebears. This was also expressed by Kaufmann (2017; see also 2018a) in his report ‘Racial self-interest is not racism’ where he argued that Brexit was an expression of white, particularly working class, ‘racial self-interest’ (what Goodhart terms ‘White Identity Politics’). For Kaufmann, it is crucial to ‘avoid using charges of racism to side-line discussions of ethno-demographic interests’ in relation to issues such as opposition to immigration. According to Goodhart, cited in the report, ‘The liberal reflex to tar legitimate majority grievances with the brush of racism risks deepening western societies’ cultural divides’.

Racial and gender logics: Anti-intersectionality intersectionality/anti-identity politics identitarianism

There are several discursive and ideological functions of the white working class 'left behind' thesis. By racialising the working class as white and constructing whiteness and white interests in class terms, as well as being 'the demos' not only is the diversity of the working class denied (see Virdee 2014, Patel 2015), but anti-immigrant and racist positions, as well as Brexit and its implications, are granted legitimacy while also cast as the responsibility of the disenfranchised. According to Luke Gittos (2016) of *Spiked!*, in a context of a rise in hate crime and far right activism during the Brexit campaign: 'the onset of panic has revealed how the very publications and commentators who once claimed to stand up for the working class in fact view working-class people as a violent, racist horde'. This is also something we see in the work of Goodhart and Kaufmann. For Kaufmann (2018b), white majorities and culture are allegedly under threat and this causes and justifies racism and xenophobia:

When whites can't express their sense of ethnic loss, they turn to the seemingly more "respectable" alternatives of demonising Muslims, criticising immigrants who live in minority neighbourhoods, or voting for Brexit (a result of diverting concerns over ethnic change into hatred of the acceptably "white" EU).

It is not only where 'blame' is apportioned, but that this construction also treats white 'indigenous' Britons as the most disenfranchised and victimised, by their elected leaders and other racial and ethnic groups who are allegedly unfairly privileged over them. The source of this is attributed to everything from decolonisation and deindustrialisation, where white working-class men can no longer be providers and protectors, to political correctness, identity politics, intersectionality and 'wokeness' (usually anti-racism and feminism). As privileged white people are often left out of the race vs class politics of the 'left behind' thesis, except where they are driving and benefitting from the analysis, and can be seen to be affected by anti-racism and feminism, it ceases to be about class and becomes about white, and often male, victimisation. The intersection of race and gender in right-wing and wider racist discourses is by no means new. Historically, the racist discourses have been based around the construction of white men as protectors of women under threat by racialised men. While we still see this, particularly with liberal Islamophobia targeting Islam and Muslims in the name of women's rights (Mondon and Winter 2017), there has been a discursive change with white men increasingly represented as victims of social change and social forces in post-civil rights and post-industrial America and post-industrial Britain (see: Daniels 1997, Faludi 1999, Ferber 1998, Gabriel 1998). In addition to the material conditions that may inform this construction, it is also predicated on the post-racial culture of equivalence. This is where real or perceived equality is not only equated with the loss of

white privilege, but vulnerability and victimisation at the hands of others in a supposed reversal of the established racial and gender order that places white men at the bottom of the social hierarchy. White men come out as intersectional losers as a result of the intersection of their whiteness and masculinity, and women, people of colour and migrants are cast as winners. When pushed to its conclusion, this narrative argues that this leaves white men subject to so-called reverse racism and sexism.

In the current context, the articulation of loss and victimisation goes well beyond the 'left behind' constituency and discourse. It is a discursive strategy that also involves the appropriation of the very discourses through which racialised people and women, and those with intersecting identities, articulate their marginalisation and inequality historically (Crenshaw 1989; see also Olufemi 2020). It is an anti-intersectional intersectionality and an anti-identity politics identity politics. While seemingly opposing identity politics and intersectional theory, and so-called 'Grievance Studies', it is co-opted by them to represent white male interests and perceived reversal of the racial and gender order, using tools they may believe worked for other groups at their expense. Ironically, it often emanates from privileged actors, institutional positions and platforms. Examples of this include the so-called Intellectual Dark Web (IDW) and 'Grievance Studies' hoax that sought to expose feminist and left wing scholarship for allegedly having a 'cynically biased perspective on men, masculinity, heterosexuality and whiteness' (Lindsay, Boghossian and Pluckrose 2019). We also see this in its most extreme on the far right Identitarian movement and wider alt-right, and the misogynist Men's Rights Activists and Incels or 'involuntary celibates' (Winter 2018).

For University Professor and IDW associate Jordan Peterson, the concept of 'white privilege' is an attack on white people:

being called out on their white privilege, identified with a particular racial group and then made to suffer the consequences of the existence of that racial group and its hypothetical crimes, and that sort of thing has to come to a stop. ... [It's] racist in its extreme (in Bandler 2016).

What is typical is that white people deny expressions of racism, as can be seen in the case of Kaufmann's distinction between racism and racial self-interest, but criticism of racism is seen as anti-white racism.

In the UK, opposition to identity and intersectional politics and the representation of white men as a marginalised and victimised group are frequent talking points. According to Brendan O'Neill (2020a), defending Terry Gilliam, another white man, following his criticism of #MeToo, transgender rights and self-identification as a 'black lesbian' for status in the context of identity and intersectional politics:

The casual manner in which 'white man' has become a term of abuse is deeply worrying. It treats whiteness almost as an original sin. It turns the accident of white skin into a marker for evil, a sign that you're a morally questionable creature. It's time to bring this white-man-bashing to an end.

Perhaps the most infamous and well publicised example of this in recent times, was the appearance of actor and recording artist Lawrence Fox on BBC Question Time in January 2020. Fox, part of an acting dynasty and graduate of The Harrow School and RADA, is neither 'left behind', working class, nor an obvious candidate for the show. He is though part of a pattern in which reactionary identitarians are given a platform in the interests of so-called 'balance' and the appearance of 'free speech'. On the show, Fox clashed with audience member, academic Rachel Boyle, after she argued that Meghan Markle was the victim of racism. In response, Fox asserted that '[i]t's not racism' and, playing the post-race card, 'We're the most tolerant lovely country in Europe'. When, in response to his claim and lack of understanding, Boyle called Fox 'a white privileged male', he quickly abandoned post-racial colourblindness, co-opted the language of anti-racism for himself and claimed reverse racism: 'I can't help what I am, I was born like this, it's an immutable characteristic ... So to call me a white privileged male is to be racist. You're being racist' (Jarvis 2020). Of course, in response to the exchange and criticism of Fox, a series of articles appeared in *Spiked!*. These included 'Laurence Fox and the woke McCarthyists' which used culture war framing to represent Boyle, a woman of colour, and other critics as 'elites' and Fox, a privileged white man, as a victim: 'Disagree with the cultural elites and they will try to destroy you' (O'Neill 2020b).

Conclusion

It is not just that the representation of the white working class as the 'left behind' and white men as victims is ideological, it is also false and dangerous. The danger is that, as noted, it legitimises racism and negates the experiences and needs of the most disenfranchised and at risk of both racism, sexism and inequality, Black and minority ethnic working class people, and particularly women of colour, who are purported to have power and status in this construct. For the Runnymede Trust (Khan and Shaheen 2017), the racialisation of the working class and focus on white interests ignored the wider diversity of the working class and inequality faced by Black and minority ethnic communities, migrants and refugees. This divide-and-rule politics constructed a zero-sum competition for representation and reduced resources between the 'indigenous' white working class and 'others', even though socio-economic inequality and related problems (poverty, lack of social mobility, low wages, housing and institutional representation), predominantly represented as white working class problems, 'cut across racial groups', with ethnic minorities, particularly women of colour, suffering the brunt of austerity politics (Khan 2017; see also Runnymede Trust 2015 and Bassel and Emejulu 2017a, 2017b).

The white working class construct pits this elusive and narrowly defined group against racialised minorities and migrants, who are denied working class status, in a competition for scarce, deregulated and casualised employment and ever dwindling resources in neo-liberal Britain, and elsewhere. In addition to not addressing the inequality faced by 'white' working class people, it exacerbates the inequality and vulnerability faced by racialised and migrant working class peoples and actually serves establishment political and economic interests. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the context of Covid-19 and the lockdown where working class people, and BAME people and migrants have disproportionately been on the front line and affected, with death rates from Covid-19 in England being higher among people of Black and Asian origin than the white majority. Yet, all they received were rounds of applause and in the case of migrants, a surcharge to use the NHS and greater restrictions on what are termed 'unskilled' jobs until it was lifted in response to public pressure. Meanwhile the reactionary advocates of the 'left behind' pushed for an end to the lockdown, a move which would predominantly serve their elitist interests, while putting more pressure on poorer communities and placing them in direct danger.

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