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## A Sovereign People? Political Fantasy and Governmental Time in the Pursuit of Brexit.

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# **A sovereign people? Political fantasy and governmental time in the pursuit of Brexit**

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May faced a choice between a fantasy Brexit, designed only to gratify a minority who are immune to gratification, and real Brexits that require compromise on every side. It wasn't an appealing decision, but nor was it a hard one. (Behr, 2018)

There has been an outpouring of journalistic and academic writing that has used the idea of fantasy to describe and critique Brexit (see, for example, Gearty, 2016; Nawrotek, 2017; Newbigin, 2017; Eaglestone, 2018; Shariatmardi, 2018). It has been one widely used figure through which to address both the political leadership (of the campaign to leave and of the Conservative Party in government) and the popular support for Leave. Much of the time, 'fantasy' has been deployed as an image driven by liberal scepticism – denoting the apparently ill-informed, misguided and potentially disastrous project of leaving the EU. It has been frequently expressed in the image of searching for 'unicorns' as a way of registering the triumph of fantasy and desire over rationality (e.g., Rigby, 2019). It is not the aim here to treat fantasy in these terms, as marking a politics that is explicitly or implicitly contrasted with hard-headed realism or rational political decision-making. Too much of the debate around Brexit has found it convenient to dismiss the vote to leave in such terms. However, this does not mean abandoning the idea of fantasy: this chapter is more interested in how fantasy may be a productive way of thinking about processes of political articulation and

mobilisation – offering a means of addressing projections and promises that find political purchase. The chapter certainly does not assume that only the Leave campaign traded in affective politics that involved the use of collective fantasies: the campaign to remain was dubbed ‘Project Fear’ by the Leave campaign for good reason, and contrasted the projected economic misery outside the EU with images of other empowered (largely consumerist) futures for UK citizens should they make the ‘reasonable’ choice.

In the context of Brexit, then, one might pay attention to specific aspects of political-cultural fantasy work that project a double dynamic of loss and restoration; examples of what Paul Gilroy has described as melancholia, borrowing and adapting the term from Freud to explore the postcolonial condition in Britain. He suggests that the condition of postcolonial melancholia results from the country’s refusal to face up to the end of an empire that was foundational for its economic, social and political arrangements. Rather than the collective culture working through this sense of loss, Britain refuses to address both the history of empire (except as a mercantilist and a civilising project) and the implications of its loss. Instead, he argues, Britain is trapped in a collective pathology which manifests itself in mood swings that switch from ‘racist violence [as] an easy means to ‘purify’ and re-homogenize the nation’ that is the condition for ‘shame-faced tides of self-scrutiny and self-loathing’, interrupted by ‘outbursts of manic euphoria’ of national celebration (Gilroy, 2004, p. 102). As Gary Younge (2016) among others has claimed this long history is intertwined with the promise of Brexit: the restoration of (imperial) greatness, the celebration of a sovereign nation and the recovery of a lost ‘way of life’.

This chapter explores the central place that ideas of British sovereignty played in the referendum campaign and its aftermath. In particular, it shows how the conception of the nation as a sovereign people was central to the political mobilisation through the promise to ‘take back control’ and how this idea has persisted as a key reference point for continuing conflicts over Brexit. This promise to ‘take back control’ acted as a representation of *collective agency*, evoking an idea of restoring power to the people in a variety of ways. This has formed a potent but troubling coupling of fantasy (as a mode of political mobilisation) and agency, making the projection of collective agency vital for the political alignments that

the campaign to leave the EU constructed. Subsequently, the chapter examines the disjuncture that emerged between the distinctive populist temporality of the Leave campaign (the promise of immediate liberation) and the return of governmental temporality (the long march through the institutions). In doing so, it draws on and develops Taguieff's insight that populist political discourse suspends time in favour of a continuous present (2007). By contrast, the negotiation of Brexit has restored different temporalities (of negotiation, of constitutional reform, of parliamentary debate and more). In this process, the fantasy of the sovereign people and Brexit as an expression of collective agency has continued to play a central role in the denunciation of delay, doubt and dissent.

## **A sovereign people?**

The political conflict over the UK's membership of the EU articulated around the 2016 referendum was dominated by questions of sovereignty, particularly the Leave campaign's desire to bring about a restoration of political sovereignty from Brussels to Westminster. Sovereignty has emerged as a contemporary keyword in response to the dynamics of its displacement, rearrangement and disciplining by transnational dynamics, most evidently those driven by neo-liberal globalisation. Wendy Brown has argued that:

While it is no news that nation-state sovereignty is challenged by global movements of capital and the growing power of transnational legal, economic and political institutions, the other forces are less often recognized as part of political sovereignty's undoing. These include the political rationalities of neoliberalism, transnational moral and legal discourses, along with activations of power related to, but not reducible to capital – those that traffic under the sign of culture, ideology and religion. Meanwhile forces sustaining or shoring up nation-state sovereignty are few and tend to be backward looking – for example, nationalism, despotism and imperialism. (Brown, 2010, pp 22-3)

Nation states have occupied a critical place as the creators and guarantors of the political, social and cultural conditions for neo-liberalisation and renewed capital accumulation: constructing consent, policing emergent crises and managing

contradictions (even while dismembering particular state apparatuses). At the core of this process has been the welfare state and Claus Offe's famous contradiction: 'The contradiction is that while capitalism cannot co-exist *with*, neither can it exist *without*, the welfare state' (1984, p. 153; emphasis in the original). We have seen forty years of constant innovation – varieties of welfare reform and state reform – attempting to resolve this contradiction, creating new welfare apparatuses that are more disciplinary. Such reforms have developed models of 'corporate welfare' while making social welfare increasingly anti-social (responsibilising welfare, 'do-it-yourself' welfare and welfare as surveillance and scrutiny). Despite this, the contradiction persists, not least because of the glaring failures of neo-liberalisation, including growing inequality, social dislocation and the inability to meet the most basic human needs. As recent national-populist political movements have understood, people still look to nation states to provide support and well-being, even if these movements have constructed those desires in nationalist/nativist terms – welfare for 'our people'.

As a result, it is not surprising that so many current political projects – including Brexit – deal in this hyphenated complexity, offering to rescue both the nation-as-people and the nation-as-state. These restorationist promises centre on a strange combination of 'sovereignty' and the 'way of life' associated with the people – they underpin the commitment to 'make X great again'. These contemporary nationalisms come in different forms and imagine the rearrangement of the nation's relationship to the global in different ways. Some claim to step out of the circuits of neoliberal globalisation by renegotiating the terms of membership or trade (such as Trump's trade wars and attacks on multi-lateral institutions such as the United Nations and International Criminal Court, for example). Others (Modi's Hindu nationalism, for instance) seek an expanded place in the global economy. The UK's Conservative government has offered a vision of a post-Brexit UK that transcends the narrow confines of Europe by leading a new era of global free trade:

A truly Global Britain is possible, and it is in sight. And it should be no surprise that it is. Because we are the fifth biggest economy in the world. Since 2010 we have grown faster than any economy in the G7. And we attract a fifth of all foreign investment in the EU. We are the biggest foreign investor in the

United States. We have more Nobel Laureates than any country outside America. We have the best intelligence services in the world, a military that can project its power around the globe, and friendships, partnerships and alliances in every continent. We have the greatest soft power in the world, we sit in exactly the right time zone for global trade, and our language is the language of the world. (May, 2016)

Such projections of the post-Brexit future emerge in the contradictions of the fraught location occupied by the nation-state in the interstices of neo-liberal globalisation. They combine past, present and future in unsettling ways, locating past greatness alongside present debilitation and future triumph.

Wendy Brown's analysis (above) connects the experience of 'waning sovereignty' with the rise of 'walled states' and while the UK may not be engaged in the project of wall building, the withdrawal from the EU was demanded in familiar terms – notably the capacity to control 'our own borders'. Sovereignty, as Gordon has argued, occupied a central but confusing place in the Leave campaign, involving a conflation of 'internal' sovereignty aspects (the constitutional location of sovereignty in parliament) and 'external' forms (the UK's capacity to act as a state 'engaged in supranational and international systems and relationships') (2016, p. 335). Such confusions have been politically and governmentally consequential in arguments about the proper location of sovereignty and about the composition of the nation, not least in relation to the border between the UK and the Republic of Ireland (and the EU). The chapter will come back to these issues later, but here it is important to draw a distinction between expert knowledge about constitutional questions and the political imagining of sovereignty as a site in which national virility and popular agency are condensed. Sovereignty in this sense is the bearer of potent fantasies about power – and powerful fantasies about potency.

## **Imagining agency: 'Take back control'**

It may be productive to focus on one particular aspect of political-cultural fantasy that concerns the issue of agency – the central Brexit promise of 'taking back control'. This promise was central to the campaign and to its capacity to mobilise a wide constituency of disaffected groups (see Jeremy Gilbert on 'disaffected consent', 2015). As the author has argued elsewhere, the Leave campaign was

able to articulate a variety of disaffections and senses of loss (Clarke, forthcoming). These include the economic dislocation of de-industrialisation (starting in the early 1980s); the cultural dislocation of the 'way of life' premised on full male employment in Fordist capitalism, in which work, family and the state (especially the welfare state) were articulated in what are now cast as 'traditional' ways (see, for example, Williams, 1989; Jessop, 1993; Clarke, 2013). Tzouvala suggests that the profound sense of *loss* can also be understood as a distinctively neoliberal 'structure of feeling' (even as it draws on multiple sources): 'this real sense of "loss of control" is not only linked to the transfer of decision-making to supranational bodies, but also a direct consequence of the inherent logic of neoliberalism' (2017, p. 122). Disaffections also involve the postcolonial melancholia noted earlier, in which that 'way of life' was bound up in intimate ways with a profoundly racialised sense of Britishness, and, perhaps more importantly, Englishness. In the moment of Brexit, the United Kingdom, Great Britain, Britishness and Englishness performed endless substitutions, with the precise reference slipping and sliding. Frustrations also piled up around a sense of being ignored by the political classes, intensified by the willingness of those leaders to distribute misery through post-2008 austerity policies (see Chapters Montgomery and Grasso, McKenzie, and Morelli). Equally significant were the multiple feelings of loss and displacement associated with social and political and cultural changes associated with a range of 'equality' projects – around gender, sexuality and race. It is no coincidence that older white men were at the core of the 'rage' expressed in the Vote Leave campaign.

David Cameron's ill-advised choice to propose a referendum on the EU encountered this maelstrom of disaffections – the decision itself a perverse confirmation of how 'out of touch' the political classes had become. The political form of the referendum loosened established political affiliations and simplified matters into the binary Yes/No vote. It created the possibility of these disaffections finding a voice. More precisely, the Leave campaign offered a very selective voicing of disaffection, ventriloquising some varieties and ignoring or silencing others, particularly those about the degradation of waged work, the de-socialisation of public life, and the self-inflicted diminished capacity of the state to protect and support those in need. What 'taking back control' signified was the possibility of a form of collective agency – seized on by those who felt themselves

'powerless' in political terms. Insa Koch (2017) has argued that the referendum was 'a chance to reject government tout court and to say no to a system of representative democracy that many have come to experience in punitive terms'. At the heart of the Brexit question, then, is this fantastic projection of individual and collective agency – the sense that control could be taken back, could be exercised and could be brandished in the faces of those who – in some form or another – had taken control away from 'us'. In these ways, the Leave campaign – and its potent slogan – offered a prospect of political agency: the chance to act effectively to bring about change and to redress grievances. The long and profoundly disenchanting rule of neo-liberalising governments of whatever party alienated many from formal political processes, as measured in declining electoral turnout and party membership. As William Davis (2016) has argued, the slogan itself was central to this promise of agency:

In this context, the slogan 'take back control' was a piece of political genius. It worked on every level between the macroeconomic and the psychoanalytic. Think of what it means on an individual level to rediscover *control*. To be a person without control (for instance to suffer incontinence or a facial tick) is to be the butt of cruel jokes, to be potentially embarrassed in public. It potentially reduces one's independence. What was so clever about the language of the Leave campaign was that it spoke directly to this feeling of inadequacy and embarrassment, then promised to eradicate it. The promise had nothing to do with economics or policy, but everything to do with the psychological allure of autonomy and self-respect. Farrage's [sic] political strategy was to take seriously communities who'd otherwise been taken for granted for much of the past 50 years.

While the fantasy of individual and collective agency is encapsulated in the very act of 'taking', the other two terms of the promise, 'back' and 'control', are more ambiguous. Many of the issues that swirled around the moment of Brexit have never been the subject of popular, nor even parliamentary, control. Most evidently missing from the list of liberal democracy's sites of citizen or popular control is economic democracy – the state of the UK economy (and its uneven social consequences) has haunted every discussion of Brexit but the question of control remained mute. How was control to be exercised over the City of London and the



flows of finance capital, or the 'British' car industry (largely foreign-owned) or even those generators of the 'new economy', such as Amazon, Uber and the like? Equally, if 'taking *back*' implied a history of power exercised by the people, then this is a rather idiosyncratic reading of British history, in which both the economy and the state have proved remarkably resistant to popular control. In a rather different way, the question of the sites, forms and effectivity of 'control' has become increasingly tangled in the aftermath of the referendum. Instead, it might be useful to consider the fantasy of agency promised in the referendum as one of those characteristic 'magical solutions' to which popular politics – and popular culture – have been prone.

The concept of magical solutions has played a significant role in cultural studies: for example, in Hall and Jefferson (1976), the idea was used to talk about youth subcultures wrestling with pressing contradictions in working class experience but being only able to find resolutions to them in the realm of the symbolic. In the case of Brexit, the promised resolution to the accumulating experiences of disempowerment, disaffection and despair may also have failed to materially resolve the problems of control. The one-shot exercise of agency in the referendum vote has, so far, proved frustrating in many registers, generating both renewed despair and unleashing new waves of frustration and anger among *both* Brexiteers and Remainers.

## **Making Brexit mean Brexit? Time, space and sovereignty**

When the result of the referendum was confirmed, Nigel Farage celebrated by describing it as the UK's 'Independence Day':

We have broken free from a failing political union. We have managed, the little people, the ordinary people who have ignored all the threats that have come from big business and big politics and it has been a huge, amazing exercise in democracy. (Nigel Farage, 24 June 2016)

However, it has been a difficult – and as yet unfinished – transition to independence; difficulties that other independence projects have previously encountered. The attempt to make Brexit come true in practice has occurred at the uncomfortable intersection of two very different types of temporality. On the

one hand, the promise of Brexit was articulated in what Pierre-André Taguieff has described as the distinctive temporality of populism, in which historical time is replaced by a continuous and immediate present, embodied in a promise to efface 'any distance between all desires and their realisation' (2007, p. 16; the author's translation). Here we can see the temporality of Farage's proclaimed 'Independence Day' and the recurring insistence that Brexit must be delivered, no matter what obstacles might appear.

On the other hand, there has been a return to what might be called 'political-governmental time' in which treaties need to be remade, negotiations need to be conducted, economic and political relationships need to be reconstructed and timetables, schedules and plans need to be established. Suddenly, the promise of immediate liberation became enmeshed in the different temporality of institutional or governmental politics. Moving from the Brexit vote to Britain's departure from the EU has involved dismantling existing institutionalised formations, embedded in treaties, maps, legislation, governmental ordering, sets of habituated relationships, practices and places, and forms of affiliation and attachment. Brexit required the enactment and instantiation of the desired new order in the same registers of institutionalisation and normalisation.

All of these insert a form of historical time between the referendum vote and the materialisation of the decision in a new ordering of things. Time, in this sense, is intrinsic to the worlds of policy and politics, even though it may also be used as a device for the management of policy and politics (Pollitt, 2008). Frustrated Brexiteers have recurrently accused 'enemies of the people' of using time (delay, blocking, foot-dragging, etc.) as a means to deflect, or at least delay, the UK's exit from the EU. This may well be true, but the populist desire for immediate consummation seems ill-equipped to deal with political-governmental time – and points to a landscape of further disaffection. In the process, it might be noted, the central populist ideas of 'the people' shrinks to include only those who voted to leave: the true believers, the real people (see Chapter Guderjan and Wilding).

The efforts to make Brexit materialise have produced new *disorders* of space, scale and sovereignty as multiple social, political, governmental and constitutional problems have emerged. In this context, this chapter will only touch on the question of how united the United Kingdom might be, which is picked upon in

other contributions to this volume. The UK has always been a complex political and constitutional formation that combines four political-cultural spaces: England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. In the last twenty years, that formation became more complicated through power-sharing arrangements in the north of Ireland which softened the border between the North and the Republic of Ireland, and through the creation of forms of devolved government in Scotland and Wales.

Brexit has unsettled the spatial and scalar arrangements of the UK in several ways. First, it marked a degree of political-cultural separation between England and Wales on the one hand where majorities voted Leave, and Scotland and Northern Ireland which both supported Remain. The effects of these divisions have been visible in discontent about the perceived effects of English dominance of the UK (see Chapter Stolz). The spatial and scalar problems of maintaining a union become more complex still in the case of Northern Ireland (see Chapter Birrell and Carmichael). One outcome of the peace process in the 1990s was the erasure of the former 'hard border' between the North and the Republic (see, for example, Gilmore, 2017). All three governments involved, the UK, the Republic of Ireland and the parties of the Northern Ireland Assembly, have been reluctant to restore a 'hard border' between the UK and the EU. Yet control of 'our borders' forms a central promise of the Leave campaign's imagining of sovereignty.

It is, indeed, the issue of sovereignty that has proved most disorderly after Brexit. The referendum produced much political turmoil, not least in contests over the leadership of the Conservative, Labour and UKIP parties. The Conservative Party in government found itself the inheritor of the result and its new leader, Theresa May, announced that 'Brexit means Brexit' in the face of political disaffection within her own party, as well as within parliament more widely. The government would act, she insisted, to trigger Article 50 (the legal device to begin disentangling the UK and the EU), but this announcement produced a constitutional conflict about the form and location of sovereignty. This came to centre on whether it was the government or parliament that could trigger Article 50, with the Prime Minister insisting that it was the government's choice while many MPs and legal commentators argued that it was a decision for parliament.

In a dramatic intervention, an entrepreneur and philanthropist, Gina Miller, led a campaign that sought a judicial review of this issue. The Supreme Court

adjudicated in 2017 that constitutional sovereignty (in the capacity to trigger the Article dissociating the UK from the EU) was embodied in parliament – a decision that led to accusations of treason against both the judges and those who brought the case – notably the evidently ‘unBritish’ Gina Miller. Miller attracted much hostility. She was subjected to death and rape threats, castigated as a member of the liberal/cosmopolitan London elite and attacked for not being British, despite holding British citizenship, not least from the 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount St Davids:

Rhodri Philipps, the 4th Viscount St Davids, was jailed on July 13 for writing a number of racially and abusive posts [sic] on Facebook. One post read: “£5,000 for the first person to ‘accidentally’ run over this bloody troublesome first generation immigrant.” Philipps, of Knightsbridge, central London, also called her a “f---ing boat jumper” four days after Ms Miller, 52, won a landmark High Court challenge against the Government. (*The Telegraph*, 2017)

Meanwhile, the three judges who made the ruling were denounced as ‘enemies of the people’, who were thwarting the popular will. In one of the more constitutionally accurate, if politically puzzling, twists, they were also criticized for being ‘unelected’.

Much of this attack was led by sections of the tabloid press, who have identified a rich stream of popular rage to be tapped in the fantasy of ‘sovereignty’. The singularity of Brexit – ‘Brexit means Brexit’ – is passionately defended as the ‘Will of the People’ and this is articulated in the same populist/anti-elitist register developed in the campaign. This ‘muscular populism’ denounces any attempt to undermine the ‘popular will’ in a recurrently racist and misogynistic repertoire. It deploys a repertoire of vitalist masculine tropes: inviting opponents to ‘stop whining’, ‘suck it up’, ‘grow some balls’ and so on. Those identified by the tabloid press as the ‘Remoaners’ are pictured as willing to try any ploy to defeat, delay or deflect the decision to leave. In this process, the governmental complexity of locating and enacting sovereignty is trumped by the clarion declaration that ‘we won’.

The negotiation of governmental complexity (and governmental time) against this populist simplification and its temporality remains a central site of contestation –

and one of the terrains of potential political mobilisation. Different temporalities thus form one strand of the complexities of the long drawn out moment of Brexit, wonderfully summarised by Bob Jessop in the following:

Brexit is so polyvalent a notion and so complex a process that its present meaning is hard to define and its future trajectory hard to discern. Over the next two to three years, we are likely to observe a process akin to a three-dimensional chess game with many participants and even more stakeholders playing according to uncertain rules open to contested renegotiation. (Jessop, 2017, p. 129)

## **Beyond fantasy: collective agency and the problem of politics**

Treating the promise to 'take back control' as a fantasy of collective agency is linked to the question of political futures and to the issue of how the felt 'loss of control' has been and might be mobilised. Gerbaudo has posed this question in terms of how the return of sovereignty returns issues of collective power to the political agenda:

The return *en auge* of the question of sovereignty in current political debates bespeaks the profound crisis of neoliberalism, and the way its agony and the connected opening of a post-neoliberal horizon, is reviving demands for collective control over politics and society. (Gerbaudo, 2016)

While accepting his framing of the question, this chapter suggests two possible – and diametrically opposed – lines of potential development. The first builds on the current right-wing mobilisations of power and control, linking them to regressive and exclusivist notions of sovereignty in which the search to restore past powers – and glories – is the dominant framing. The problematic dynamic of these moves concerns the likely frustrations, failures and unfulfilled promises of such programmes, possibly intensifying the senses of loss. This might be fertile ground for a new anti-politics in which the people come to feel betrayed or abandoned by another political leadership, confirming their disaffection from politics all over again. Neither resentful immobilisation nor the potential search for a 'strong man' who claims to transcend politics are attractive prospects.

The alternative is the development of a progressive politics of popular sovereignty that took the search for collective power and control seriously – and extended its reach into the hitherto insulated or resistant domains of society, not least the economy. Attending to economic exclusion, dispossession and its unevenly distributed effects (from private wealth to degraded public services) might be a terrain on which a longer term politics of democratic agency might be developed whose range could extend well beyond the economic, transforming the institutionalised systems of power and inequality in the process. It might even bring about an expansive and inclusive conception of ‘the people’ and the popular.

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