

# Brexit and the working class on Teesside: Moving beyond reductionism

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## Abstract

Too often, members of the working class who voted to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum have been framed as uneducated and unaware of their own economic interests. This article, based on 26 in-depth face-to-face interviews and a further telephone interview on Teesside in the North East of England, offers an alternative perspective that is more nuanced and less reductionist. The article critiques some of the commonly heard tropes regarding the rationale for voting leave, it then exposes how leave voters rooted their decision in a localised experience of neoliberalism's slow-motion social dislocation linked to the deindustrialisation of the area and the failure of political parties, particularly the Labour Party, to speak for regional or working-class interests.

## Keywords

Brexit, nationalism, neo-liberalism, political economy, working class

## Introduction

In recent years, right-wing nationalism has proliferated across the West (Winlow et al. 2019). In the United States, Donald Trump has been the principle beneficiary of widespread anger and dissatisfaction. In France, the anti-immigrant populist Marine Le Pen,

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leader of the National Rally, harnessed one-third of the vote in the French Presidential election in 2017. Similarly, the Alternative für Deutschland party has made significant gains and entered the German parliament for the first time in their history. This shift in support for nationalism is mirrored in other large European economies, including Italy and Holland. Britain has also witnessed a growth in support for nationalist causes. Many deindustrialised locales that were once the bedrock of socialism – such as Teesside – voted to leave the European Union (EU) in 2016. This vote attracted widespread support from the working class (Gough 2017).

Wincott et al. (2019) argue that,

nearly three years after the referendum, work is needed to make sense of the UK's complex identities . . . Analysing the politics of England is important in its own right. Indeed, to understand British politics or the future of the UK, we need to make sense of England. (p. 45)

Thus, this article seeks to develop an understanding of the Brexit vote among members of the working class in Teesside in the North East of England. The gradual social dislocation of many working-class individuals in Teesside's post-industrial landscape has combined with a sense of being taken for granted and thereby abandoned politically by the Labour Party – which has historically defended the interests of this social group. Our participants linked this extensive and deeply felt political alienation to their reasons for voting to leave the EU. As such, we argue that it should be considered as, at least, a contributory factor to one of the most unexpected election results in the modern era, which caught many mainstream media outlets, politicians and academics off-guard (Eatwell & Goodwin 2018). Scholars have noted that the working-class leave vote has been roundly condemned (see, for example, Eatwell & Goodwin 2018; Reay 2017), with some commentators claiming that such working-class individuals are intellectually deficient and incapable of understanding their own economic interests (e.g. Bergmann 2018; Campanella & Dassu 2019; D'Ancona 2018; Patel & Connelly 2019; Poutvaara & Steinhardt 2018; Stone 2017; Swami et al. 2018; Zavala et al. 2017; Zhang 2017). However, to make sense of this major political event we will move beyond such reductionist stereotypes and analyse the Brexit vote and its motivations in relation to both historical and local contextual factors. As a result, the referendum result is less unexpected and more sociologically interesting than some accounts allow for.

Throughout the 20th century, Teesside was home to shipbuilding, mining, steelmaking, petrochemicals and heavy engineering. The River Tees provided easy access to the North Sea and facilitated the transportation of Teesside's products to the rest of the world (Benyon et al. 1994). The region was, therefore, central to British capital accumulation throughout the 20th century (Hudson 2004). Rapid industrialisation led to an equally rapid increase in the area's population from the late 19th century, as people came from afar to take advantage of the demand for a large industrial workforce. During the 20th century, tens of thousands of people were employed in the newly established petrochemicals industry, which included a site that was the largest producer of ammonia in the world (Warren 2018). Accordingly, Teesside's industrial base rapidly became an area of global importance, branded as 'an infant Hercules' (Benyon et al. 1994: 19). The rhythm

of industrial work, its lucid biographical trajectories and the stability and security it provided, was at the centre of the cultures that developed in Teesside's towns.

The 1980s 'neoliberal restoration' (Badiou 2008) was committed to a globalised free-market economy and predicated on an audacious and unprecedented economic experiment – the reversal of the global flows of trade and capital (Varoufakis 2011). Rapid capital flight followed as an array of large corporations and innovative new companies shifted their centres of production to developing countries to lower production costs and maximise profits. As a result, Teesside experienced a shift from an economy centred on production – branded as a branch plant economy (Hudson 2004; Pike 1999) – to services comprised mainly of leisure and retail. The loss of 100,000 manufacturing jobs and the gain of 92,000 jobs in the service economy between 1971 and 2008 exemplifies this shift (Shildrick et al. 2012). These employment opportunities are often non-unionised, poorly paid and deny workers' rights and basic entitlements (see Lloyd 2018a, 2018b). Accordingly, Teesside's workers were compelled to change their social, economic and cultural outlook. At the same time the welfare state was cut back, and trade union membership dwindled. This economic and social decline was exacerbated in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, which was followed by regressive austerity measures targeted principally at the public sector, including severe cuts to local authority budgets and the closure of public services. The welfare reforms from 2010 onwards have hit the poorest areas hardest. Beatty and Forthergill (2016) describe this as a process in which 'communities in older industrial Britain are being meted out punishment in the form of welfare cuts for the destruction wrought to their industrial base' (p. 2). To compound matters further the local steelworks closed in 2015, which was the second largest blast furnace in Europe. Consequently, thousands of people lost their jobs.

The absence of a genuine industrial economic policy in the region (Beatty & Forthergill 2016) has affected the previously strong political commitment to democratic socialism on Teesside. Throughout the 20th century, especially after the Second World War, all the town's key industries were dominated by powerful labour unions, and usually had a representative from the Labour Party as their member of parliament (Benyon et al. 1994). Such traditional political commitments have changed in these troubled times.

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) positioned itself as anti-establishment and anti-immigrant, enjoyed sizable support on Teesside between 2014 and 2016. Throughout the campaign on European membership, its former leader Nigel Farage posited a battle between the 'Peoples' Army' (Shipman 2017) and mainstream politicians, commentators and capitalist class who mainly backed Remain (see Mulvey & Davidson 2018). Their principal objective – leave the EU – was popular in the former industrialised areas of Teesside, as all the local authority areas elected to leave the EU in 2016 (Warren 2018). For instance, Middlesbrough's vote to leave stood at 65% and Redcar and Cleveland 66% (Warren 2018). Significantly, Teesside contains a locale – Brambles and Thortree – which collected the proportionally highest leave vote in Britain (see Rosenbaum 2017).

This article's purpose is to take stock of the social and political opinions in relation to the Brexit vote through interviewing a sample of working-class men and women in Teesside. The section 'Neoliberalism and Brexit' will map out several of the reductionist analyses of the Brexit vote and develop a critique of their utility. In section 'Methodology',

the methodology for the study will be outlined and the participants' demographic context will be examined. In section 'Findings: social and political dissatisfaction', the data from the qualitative interviews will be presented. Finally, sections 'Analysis' and 'Conclusion' of the article will analyse these findings and develop three central arguments which are as follows:

- (a) Focusing on neoliberal effects on working-class life over the last 40 years provides an important explanatory framework for the vote;
- (b) The Labour Party's abandonment of the working class appears to be a principal reason why these people voted to leave;
- (c) The EU referendum offered a unique opportunity for working-class people to voice their dissatisfaction with the dominant social, cultural and political hegemon in contemporary England.

## **Neoliberalism and Brexit**

In order to understand the structural, ideological and social processes that contributed to the political alienation associated with the Brexit vote, three key themes will be explored: first, the Brexit vote will be contextualised alongside wider debates about New Labour, nationalism, socioeconomic inequalities and the fate of the working class during the neoliberal era; second, interpretations of the Brexit vote that use a broad 'moral panic' thesis to frame working-class views on immigration and identity need to be scrutinised carefully; and, finally, the analytical implications of a methodological tendency towards 'abstracted empiricism' in some of the literature that examines working-class attitudes to Brexit must be challenged as overly reductionist for interpreting such a complex social phenomena.

Brexit is embedded within the logic of neoliberalism: deregulation of the economy; the privatisation of public services and utilities; low wages and growing socioeconomic inequalities; and the exhaustion of the neoliberal growth model (see, for example, Bailey 2018; Jessop 2018a; 2018b; Nolke 2017). These policies were pursued by the mainstream political parties, causing what Jessop (2018a) calls a 'nationalist and populist blowback' (p. 1730). Ford and Goodwin (2017) conclude that this indicates a return of the 'left behind' (p. 20) to politics. However, the 'left behind' narrative can lead to a devaluation of the working class, which, as McKenzie (2017a) argues, feeds into 'stereotypes and prejudices that the poor white working class are old-fashioned, un-modern, have no mobility and long for the past' (p. 208). Such discourses, therefore, should be treated with caution as they can cover up the systematic inequalities that have led to a huge global disparity in wealth and power.

Despite reservations about the 'left-behind' notion, there is little doubt that neoliberalism has deposited much of the West's former industrial working class, predominantly white but progressively more multi-ethnic after the Second World War, into more precarious forms of employment. The neoliberal political consensus in the United Kingdom centred on the claim that there is no alternative to deregulation, privatisation and the retrenchment of the welfare state (Davidson & Saull 2017). Developments within the British Labour Party have reinforced this consensus. Historically, the party sought to

contain rather than replace capitalism through social democratic reform. Throughout the post-war period, it advanced working-class interests by fighting alongside trade unions for fair pay, workers' rights and full employment (Winlow et al. 2017). However, as Seymour (2010) has documented, Tony Blair's election in the 1990s marked a turning point as the party's traditional concerns with public ownership and redistribution of wealth were largely abandoned. New Labour failed to develop a coherent programme to challenge the influence of global finance capital in shaping post-industrial economies and societies (Byrne & Ruane 2017). In this respect, New Labour became married to what Fisher (2009) termed 'capitalist realism' (p. 2): The claim that a world beyond capitalism cannot be imagined. Without a significant redistributive challenge to this system, the Labour Party vacated its historic mission of representing the working class and their fundamental economic interests (Winlow et al. 2015), engendering a crisis of political representation (see Jessop 2018b). Byrne and Ruane (2017) summarise this period as one in which

New Labour had no coherent industrial policy to speak of, massively neglected its own electoral heartlands in former coalfield and heavy industrial areas and continued the process of deindustrialisation reinforced by active policy and passive neglect which had characterised the Thatcher years. (p. 50)

Accordingly, millions of working-class voters abandoned the party under New Labour's reign (Seymour 2010). This did not in itself create right-wing nationalism but a political vacuum in which it could gather increased working-class support in some of the deindustrialised zones (Winlow et al. 2017).

In their examinations of the specifics of this process, Mitchell and Fazi (2017) and Streeck (2016) focus on welfare retrenchment, austerity, falling living standards, increasing corruption and the disintegration of the traditional political domain. In particular, the inability of politics to intervene in markets and correct their outcomes has led many citizens to conclude that the British political system is no longer able to make a substantive difference to people's lives (see Mitchell & Fazi 2017; Streeck 2016). The 2008 global financial crisis was a defining moment in this process, exposing both the internal contradictions of capitalism and the role and interests of the many politicians who worked hard to protect the system and offer 'more of the same' (Whitehead & Crawshaw 2014: 20). Given this glaring inability, it should not be surprising that some working-class people stopped suspending their disbelief and sought political representation elsewhere.

It is necessary to acknowledge that Scotland (with similarities to the North East of England in terms of deindustrialisation and the influence of neoliberalism over economic and social policy) voted to Remain in the EU. While it is not a focus of this study, it is interesting to note that voters there have been able to utilise other mechanisms to express their discontent. Engstrom (2018) for example, highlights the Scottish National Party's (SNP) ousting of the Labour Party in the 2015 general election and the independence movement's desire for sovereignty, democracy and empowerment. Other studies have documented how Brexit was forged in England due to a distinct sense of national identity and associated lack of devolved institutions (Henderson et al. 2016, 2017),

which give Scottish citizens more of a voice in domestic affairs. For Scully (2018), this makes Scotland 'a wholly different electoral space to England' (p. 57).

However, returning to England and Teesside and despite this constitutive context, there has been a tendency in both academic and public debate to explain the vote as a failure of rationality and a subsequent resort to prejudiced ethical and emotional sentiments; in other words, a 'moral panic'. Hayton (2016), for example, claims that what we call nationalism today is actually a Euroscepticism borne of a general dissatisfaction with the EU and its apparent inability to defend national cultures. Similarly, Bergmann (2018) argues UKIP's 'Breaking Point' (p. 130) poster permeated fear and panic among the citizenry. Importantly, Fitzgerald and Smoczyński (2015) offer more nuance, claiming hostilities ought to be analysed alongside labour market insecurity, competition and the 2008 financial crisis. Relatedly, they assert that society has profoundly changed since the moral panic's original conceptualisation.

Horsley (2017) argues that the 'moral panic' framework hails from the heyday of the post-war era and its far more politicised and collectivised working class, which frequently took part in political action against the injustices and inequalities of capitalism. However, neoliberalism has significantly weakened the power of trade unions and the working class's ability to organise, while Badiou (2008) argues that parliamentary elections under neoliberalism have only offered the 'maintenance of the established order' (p. 34). In this climate, the social world has been enveloped by 'capitalist realism' that, in turn, has induced a culture of cynicism and disaffection (Fisher 2009). Voter turnouts in this period have markedly declined. The year 2001 witnessed a record low in UK general elections as only 59% turned out to vote (Seymour 2010). Similarly, 13 million registered voters declined to vote in the EU referendum (Horsley 2017). Winlow et al. (2017) argue that this withdrawal from the political field suggests that large segments of the working class are disengaged, indifferent and passive rather than politically active and susceptible to 'moral panics' instigated by the media.

Emphasising the economic context does not preclude important cultural issues. Immigration was a central issue in both the referendum campaign and the leave vote. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) draw attention to leave voters' concern with immigration and the scale of ethnic change, highlighting that many working-class people feel that they no longer possess a sense of belonging. Zupančič (2017) extends this argument. She claims that hostility towards EU immigration is symptomatic of a far deeper malaise associated with a yearning for the conditions of the post-war period: social and economic security, industrial employment, togetherness and prosperity. Put another way, nationalists' real desire is for root and branch social and economic change and a return to an imagined and partially idealised past (Winlow et al. 2015).

However, many commentators ignore these deeper economic, political and cultural issues. Zhang's (2017) research has attracted attention in the mainstream media (see Stone 2017). She interprets the vote to leave the EU as the product of a dearth of intellect and higher education degrees among the working class. Zhang goes on to claim that a small increase in voter turnout among adults who had accessed higher education would have reversed the result. However, this approach runs the risk of discounting over 17 million votes 'as a case of lower-class primitivism' (Žižek 2017: 227). Zhang's analysis – published in a journal with close ties to the neoliberal

economic development establishment – contributes to the class prejudice that has alienated so many working-class voters. Furthermore, her epistemological framework of abstracted demographic positivism, which equates simplified statistical correlations with complex causes, influences, experiences and personal decisions, searches for a general law – a definitive monocausal explanation. Such analyses misunderstand what social science actually is (Streeck 2016). According to Young (2011), this type of statistical model ‘confuses the ease of statistical manipulation with the rigors of science’ (p. 224). The challenge, then, is to move beyond narrow reductionism and abstracted empiricism to construct useful and valid empirical knowledge, however localised or scoped (Young 2011).

Poutvaara and Steinhardt’s (2018) research is a further example of an abstracted approach. Also using statistical data, they bypass the social and economic context and propose a causal link between ‘bitterness’ – defined as not achieving what one deserves – and concerns over immigration. Proposing a dichotomy, they simplify a complex social phenomenon and posit a monocausal analysis. Crucially, they do not ask why people are ‘bitter’; it is as if individuals acquire their sentiments and apply them to politics in a social and economic vacuum. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the working-class share of the Brexit vote is partially driven by the experiential hardships of the working class’s material realities (McKenzie 2017a; Winlow et al. 2017). As Žižek (2018) has claimed, inequalities, injustice and exploitation frame the wider social landscape in which attitudes are shaped. By neglecting these contextual factors, it could be argued that Poutvaara and Steinhardt are reducing the complex socioeconomic world to sentiment rather than exploring how it is formed and shaped. This tendency to use statistical data to aggregate rather than unpack the nuanced interplay of economic, social, historical and cultural factors represents a classic case of what Young (2011), following Mills (1959), terms ‘abstracted empiricism’. In such analyses ‘structure fades out of sight, history is banished from thought’ (Young 2011: 6), as if the Brexit vote was a direct product of the values of individuals without due consideration of the experience of life in economically abandoned locales. In this example, a London-centric scholar appears to have had little or no direct contact with the researched or their socioeconomic reality. Therefore, to quote Winlow et al. (2015) ‘abstracted empiricism rips data from their context and it refuses to engage in the kinds of theory construction that can drive forward our knowledge of the world’ (p. 138).

## Methodology

The qualitative method we employ is tethered to an ultra-realist framework (see Hall & Winlow 2015). Although it is a sophisticated and complex intellectual canon, it is intended to address the deficiencies of abstracted empiricism. Generally speaking, ultra-realism seeks to expose the core social, economic and cultural contexts in which sentiments and behaviours occur. It moves beyond the ‘symptoms’ offered by abstracted empiricism and encourages the researcher to identify the ‘generative processes’ which shape the observable world. Using an ultra-realist framework, we theorise empirical data and develop new theoretical understanding. Importantly, researchers have suggested that most commentary on Brexit focusses on national trends (Bolet et al. 2018; Mahoney &

Kearon 2018). Others have identified a dearth of qualitative research (Davenport et al. 2018; Patel & Connelly 2019; Willett et al. 2019). Thus, there is a need for more in-depth, localised and evidenced studies.

The research took place in 2017. The data presented have been gathered from in-depth face-to-face interviews with 26 people, with the addition of one telephone interview (N = 27). All voted to leave the EU apart from one, who declined to vote. Initially eight participants were recruited through a working-men's social club in the North East of England, while the rest were recruited by snowball sampling. Historically, social clubs have occupied a central position in working-class leisure and have often been associated with the Labour movement (Cherrington 2012). Access was negotiated as the lead author had previously worked part-time at the social club for 6 years, and as such acted as a 'gatekeeper' for the research. In common with McKenzie (2017) and Raymen and Smith (2017), access was made more straightforward by the researcher's ability to utilise his class orientation and biographical trajectory. In terms of the authors' positionality, both voted to remain in the EU as relatively 'reluctant remainers'.

The contextualised data presented here provides a detailed and nuanced picture of local working-class experiences and perspectives that were associated with motivations to vote leave. Therefore, the ambitions of this research are modest – simply to make an initial step along the road towards an alternative to the abstracted empiricism that has featured prominently in the debate. However, it is useful to note that while Teesside's recent socioeconomic history is unique, it does possess similar conditions to other deindustrialised locales where Brexit attracted support (see Davenport et al. 2018; McKenzie 2017a, 2017b; Mahoney & Kearon 2018; Willett et al. 2019).

All the participants are white and aged above 45. They live in various towns in Teesside. Twenty of the participants are male and seven are female. Nine of the participants are retired, although they were once part of Teesside's industrial workforce until they were made redundant. At the time of the interviews, two of the participants were unemployed, one for over a decade. Despite applying for jobs in the area and attending numerous interviews, she had been unable to obtain any viable form of waged labour. Two of the individuals (both single parents) were employed in the manufacturing sector and received around £25,000 per annum. A further 10 of the participants were currently working for various service-sector companies ranging from a haulage firm to an employment agency. Four of these individuals had previously worked in the local steelworks for several decades and obtained temporary employment after substantial periods of unemployment. Each one indicated that their current employment offered a fraction of the income, pride and stability once provided by the steelworks. The remaining two participants were self-employed (as an electrician and a tattooist) and were living rather precariously on low incomes. Collectively, however, the whole group can be identified as the working class.

The study was granted ethical approval from the host academic department and conforms to ethical standards set out by the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice. All participants offered consent prior to the interviews, having been informed about the purpose of the study, the use of data and any potential risks and



benefits associated with participation. The participants were pseudonymised to protect their identity and reduce the risk of harm.

## Findings: social and political dissatisfaction

Concerns with immigration have been central to the Brexit debate and this was reflected among eight of the participants. A small minority were hostile and racist. They expressed anger at net migration figures and wanted to stop immigrants from entering the country. Although this was difficult to listen to, the majority of concerns expressed by these eight participants were linked to their own struggles. Immigrants were viewed as an economic competitor that intensified the difficulty in obtaining remunerative work, housing and put additional pressure on underfunded public services. They also believed that immigrants were favoured by national politicians. As a result, they felt forgotten about. This was encapsulated by John. He served in the army for over two decades and told us:

. . . immigration has a bit to do with it. You see, it's all about jobs. The Great has gone out of Great Britain, people aren't proud anymore. I have no problem with migrants living here, who are working and giving money, but I do get annoyed at people who don't pay into the system, don't pay in but get the stuff – treatment, housing – for free. When you have ex-servicemen in the street, who can't get housing, an ex-army man and a British citizen who has grown up here, he should get the rights over other people who don't pay in.

That's why I voted Leave.

This view existed among the eight individuals who were hostile to immigration, but it was not their central concern. It is important to note that other research in the North East has documented diverse opinions on immigration (Dawson 2018; Fitzgerald & Smoczyński 2015). Indeed, the majority of the participants in this study expressed much deeper concerns; rooted in history and the political economy.

Overall, the striking and cross-cutting characteristic of the interviews about Brexit was that they concentrated predominantly on issues of social and political abandonment. Barry (71 and retired) had worked for 37 years in the local steelworks until it closed. He spoke of the comforts and entitlements of industrialised society, arguing that work was central to working-class life because it anchored people in a community and with a sense of togetherness, common purpose and fate. However, in the wake of the area's deindustrialisation Barry felt 'like a third-class citizen'. He spoke of a sense of absence on Teesside, for which he blamed politicians:

This area (Teesside) used to be amazing ya know, manufacturing and that, but now look, it's in a void, it stops at Leeds, nobody cares, they don't even know who we are, well, you used to call us working-class people, I'm not sure what we are now.

A similar narrative was offered by Maxine (aged 51 and unemployed):

The North East has been forgotten about, the north used to be the industry of the country, now there's no industry, we have nothing, and the morale of the people has just gone downhill.

Maxine emphasised the significance of industry because it provided working-class life with a sense of purpose, pride and respectability that has now been lost. This sense of loss was pervasive throughout the sample. For example, Matty argued that,

What has this area got to offer now? I feel sorry for the young kids, all the industry has gone, I've got a good pension so I'm lucky, but the local places are falling to bits, there's little else but charity shops and takeaways.

The discontent was expressed as a culmination of years of political neglect. In the words of Sarah (aged 42 and unemployed) 'with this area it doesn't matter who's in power, nothing changes'. Throughout the whole interview process politicians of all colours were regarded as complicit in the area's demise and 'cut from the same cloth'. They were perceived to have elevated self-serving careerism over 'caring for the people'. Mark, a postman for over 20 years:

There's too much corruption in politics, too many backhanders, too many closed doors, I couldn't trust them at all, look at all these years of austerity, because the banking sector fucked up, this is what makes me laugh, they go 'oh the country was in a mess when we took over', well why was that, 'cause we bailed the fucking banks out, the banks are their mates.

Rightly or wrongly, politicians were regarded as little more than disingenuous, corrupt liars. Furthermore, the political class and the interests of big business were perceived to be intermeshed, in the sense that they 'looked after each other' before they paid any attention to the rest of the population. The basic notion that politicians were interested solely in the preservation of their own power and wealth was ubiquitous throughout the interviews. Simon, for instance, is 55 years old and works as a roofer. He has not voted Labour since Tony Blair's premiership, instead opting for UKIP and The Conservatives. This, however, was not a positive, enthusiastic choice but a least-worst option, because 'all politicians just lie and lie anyway'. Indeed, Barry has 'always been a big union man' and his views of politicians were symptomatic of the overall sample:

Most politicians have never been in the real world, they are just all on the gravy train, they're out for themselves, not for the good of the people. Have any of them done any manual work, or worked in a factory filling up Kellogg's boxes? I doubt it.

A majority of the participants spoke of a profound disconnect between the everyday realities of the working class and the reality of Members of Parliament, who were perceived to be distant, unaccountable and shielded from the working class's socioeconomic realities. This is highlighted by Trevor:

Politicians are a bunch of absolute clueless, narrow minded, short-sighted knob-heads who haven't got a clue what's going on, they live in their own utopias.

Claire, aged 51 and working at a local bar in the area, has never voted but spoke of how 'I was so close to voting to leave the EU but I just thought fuck it in the end'. This

could be interpreted as apathy but, as the following quote illustrates, it was predicated not on a lack of interest in the Brexit debate but a cynical view of politicians:

I have worked for 36 years and they have done fuck all for me, it does my box in, why should I vote, why should I vote . . . They don't do fuck all about the likes of us, the likes of my son, there's no jobs for him, he can't afford a house, they need to lose all the bullshit they talk about and give us something proper for a change.

The above passage illustrates a pervasive sense of systemic political abandonment. Indeed, across the sample there was a strong collective perception of estrangement from the politics of the nation combined with a sense of fatalism about the future. For example, Tommy (aged 73 and retired from service in the army) was aware of the socio-economic difficulties his granddaughter will endure. His 'heart bleeds for her', he said. Similarly, Sarah spoke of how 'as a parent I worry about my children, I just think it's really sad how things are'. Such anxieties and insecurities can lead to conflicting motives, as Sarah explained,

I've got a friend who has her own business who voted for Brexit despite the fact that she knew it would harm her business, 'cos she feels so sad about this area, the government has decimated jobs and traditional industries, people have had enough.

Most participants had traditionally voted for the Labour Party and were highly antagonistic towards the Conservative Party. However, they also felt as though they had been forgotten about by Labour despite having been excited by the prospects offered by Blair's election in 1997. Such sentiments were short-lived because his New Labour government did little to challenge market fundamentalism and revive job prospects, and instead participated in regime-change wars in the Middle East. For example, Tommy argued that,

It's Labour's fucking fault, because of us, because of Blair, the biggest wanker in the world, they should trial him for what he did to Iraq, do him for treason, jail him for 40 fucking years, take every penny off the corrupt cunt.

Big Ron corroborates this:

Again, it was lies from politicians, it started off so many problems, but we know it wasn't about weapons of mass destruction, it was 'cos of oil, even us pilgrims in the street who aren't super-wise with politics, we know the truth, I can't stand Blair.

Most participants thought that Blair's leadership had destroyed the relationship between them and 'their party'. In particular, his deception around the Iraq war seemed to have symbolised an era in which politicians 'can get away with anything'. Trevor voiced his dissatisfaction with the Labour Party:

Back in the late 70s and 80s Labour was for the working people, it was a Labour party . . . look at Tony Blair he called it New Labour, they all just put a different colour tie on, it's absolute bullshit, all of it, I'm not voting again now.

A minority of the participants expressed measured excitement about the possibility that Jeremy Corbyn might represent a return to the party's leftist roots. Steven, aged 54, said,

I think Labour lost the working class, but with Corbyn it is winning them back . . . I think Labour are becoming a working-class party again, and soon we will see a Labour government.

A sizable section, however, voiced concerns. Richard, for instance, suggested that 'even if Labour got in nothing would change'. Meanwhile, John voted Labour in the 2017 general election but claimed,

I'll vote for him cause I'm Labour, but I don't think he is a leader. He didn't sing the national anthem. In the current world we need him to be stronger . . . we need him to bring good jobs back as well, but I don't see him talking about that.

Jack (retired) explained that it's difficult to forget Blair's legacy:

I have voted Labour all my life, until the last two times, I'm sick to death, the Labour Party was formed through working people, they have changed that, completely changed it, but that changed well before Corbyn.

The logic of capitalist realism – there is no alternative – had been internalised by the participants. They had lost faith in general elections and the ability of mainstream parties to yield change. They fully expected things to get worse, all they could do was adapt to the inequalities of neoliberalism. So, the referendum on EU membership opened up a different opportunity. It was perceived as a chance to change the political economy. Matty encapsulates this:

I just think the country is in a mess. We want change. People aren't happy, like me. My lifestyle has changed. I thought if I vote out it might be a good thing, I don't know. The country can't carry on like this, it's gone down the pan.

Sarah offered a similar narrative:

People were fed up with the same old rhetoric, walking the walk and not talking the talk, people wanted change, and are fed up. They're so fed up of the status-quo, people wanted change, it was also about sticking two-fingers up to the government.

## **Analysis**

This study's most important findings about the working-class leave vote in Teesside were that a longstanding disaffection with national politicians and a sense of socioeconomic decline in the area seemed to be the principal motivations. The data demonstrate that, for the working-class people taking part in this study, politicians were seen to exist solely to preserve their own interests and the status quo while simultaneously suppressing the

interests of 'ordinary' men and women. The interviewees believed that politicians are weak and engage in corruption to serve the interests of financial elites, and they believed that they are committed to what Badiou (2008) calls the 'only one world' (p. 53) view of neoliberal capitalism. The controversial invasion of Iraq in 2003 continued to fuel the perception that politicians 'got away with everything'. Tony Blair was perceived to be above the law, an example of what Hall (2012) terms 'special liberty'. The political elite regard themselves as a special group entitled to do whatever is necessary to ensure the continuation of the neoliberal economic system, even when it harms other sections of society, such as the post-industrial working class (Hall 2012).

A related theme emerging from the interviews was the belief that this entitled and negligent political elite of all colours had forgotten about the working class and would not intervene to protect their interests. This, in turn, can be linked to the notable absence of hope for a positive future among the participants, articulated in numerous concerns about the poor economic prospects of their children and grandchildren. It was striking that discussions about Brexit triggered more than anything else a deep and pervasive sense of loss and resignation linked to the inability or unwillingness of politicians to respond to the problems associated with living in an area characterised by long-term industrial decline. Putative rational arguments about Brexit causing further economic damage are likely to fall on deaf ears in regions such as Teesside, because people who feel they have little or nothing to lose are more likely to take a risk on any type of change on offer. In these circumstances, it is also possible to see the appeal of a relatively simple narrative about 'taking back control', although this is not something that was raised directly in our interviews.

It is clear, therefore, that the dissatisfaction expressed by the participants in this study had its roots in longstanding political and economic processes. The post-war settlement period provided the working class with a respectable standard of living. Readily available remunerative work was plentiful, providing fixed trajectories and a 'job for life'. Powerful trade unions also ensured that in most occupations the working class received an adequate wage (Streeck 2016). At the same time, a functioning welfare state offered a social and economic safety net (Piketty 2014). As a result, it was the only period in capitalist development in which economic inequality narrowed (Piketty 2014). Indeed, it was widely regarded by the citizens that they were living in good times, and the future imagined was one of further prosperity and equality (Mitchell & Fazi 2017; Reay 2017).

However, neoliberalism hollowed out the welfare state, privatised parts of the public sphere and deindustrialised much of Teesside. The local steelworks' recent closure signalled an end to over a century of industrial prowess (Warren 2018). Consequently, the post-war's 'cosy relationship' (Radice 2014: 286) between the working class and capital has been eviscerated. Claire, for instance, argued that her son is unable to obtain the signifiers of either a meaningful life or a comfortable standard of living (see also Byrne & Ruane 2017; Lloyd 2018a, 2018b; Shildrick et al. 2012; Streeck 2017). Over time, what was once solid, fixed and marked by continuity has become unfixed and unstable. Accordingly, the system has lowered expectations and engendered a pervasive cynicism in regions such as Teesside. The Social Mobility Commission (2016) concluded that 'the 20th century expectation that each generation would be better off than the preceding

one is no longer being met' (p. iii). According to Fisher (2014), the future has been cancelled; 'life continues, but time has somehow stopped' (p. 6), and we can no longer imagine a world beyond the present condition. In this climate, the EU referendum opened up a unique opportunity, a chance to vote for something different and hope for a significant change in how society and the economy are organised.

Perhaps most surprising was the strength of views towards the Labour Party given its historic role in defending the interests of 'ordinary' people. Žižek, (2017) attributed this to the political left's desertion of its historic origins in class struggle and the 'antagonistic logic of Us against Them' (p. 238). Despite high levels of investment in public services, New Labour sought to systematically cleanse the party of its historic roots. Political commitments to full employment, state ownership of public utilities, redistribution of wealth and political solidarity were removed from the party's constitution (Winlow et al. 2017), while the party's relationship with the trade unions was significantly weakened (Levitas 2005). Blair's premiership naturalised neoliberalism largely by entrenching the economic logic of Thatcherism (deregulation, privatisation and free-market fundamentalism) in the political left and, in so doing, making significant challenges to neoliberal orthodoxy seem like things of the past. Consequently, working-class battles against the interests of capital dissipated. Instead, the working class are now expected to take advantage of the opportunities on offer in a meritocratic social world (Winlow et al. 2015) in which social policy covers up rather than challenges the causes of inequality (Levitas 2005). The benefits of neoliberal economic policy, few of which reach the working class, were accepted without reservation. In such a climate, Thatcher claimed that Blair was her greatest achievement (Winlow et al. 2015). The findings from our albeit small-scale study corroborate the view that New Labour became disconnected from its historical position around class struggle (Levitas 2005), weakening capitalism's historic opponent in a way that effectively enabled capital to further exploit the working class (Seymour 2017). This is also an example of what Byrne and Ruane (2017) describe as the failure of 'Left parties' to address the 'absolutely recursive' causal processes of deindustrialisation, which weakened the organised working class and, thereby, weakened their social and political base. In short, the burgeoning socioeconomic problems experienced by the working class during the neoliberal era were left to continue unchallenged by New Labour and congealed into the political cynicism and discontent expressed by the participants in this study as the crucial contributory factors to their Brexit vote.

The 2008 financial crisis provides a further example of the Labour Party's betrayal of the working class (Winlow & Hall 2017). The party failed to offer a renewed socioeconomic project; broadly agreed with the political Right about the provision of publicly funded loans to banks alongside public sector austerity as solutions to the crash; including wage restraints and punitive policies that have served to discipline the labour force (see Umney et al. 2017). Historically, austerity has failed to deliver on its promise of economic growth and recovery (see Blyth 2013). Yet the party echoed much of the Conservative-led Coalition Government's deficit panic, creating a broad neoliberal consensus in response to the financial crisis. As a result, there was a striking absence of political symbolism for the working class to organise around when neoliberalism was on the brink (Treadwell et al. 2013). In failing to hold

capital and its elites to account for the destructive effects of neoliberalism, Jessop (2018b) argues that a mainstream political party consensus was formed and politics lost its substance. Thus, many working-class people in regions such as Teesside have lost hope and stopped believing that fundamental change is possible. Indeed, a core claim made here is that the apparent banality of, and similarities between the mainstream political parties were key reasons why the participants in this study voted to leave the EU. In this way, Brexit provided a unique opportunity for the working class to obtain at least a moment of political recognition, which a significant majority of our sample took without hesitation. Accordingly, the participants voted for something different and that represented genuine change. We might view this through the lens of a wider dissatisfaction with politics, perhaps even as an example of 'anti-politics' (Winlow et al. 2015).

Finally, Jeremy Corbyn has begun to remedy this drift. His election as Labour Party leader in 2015 (alongside reduced membership charges) led to a major surge in party membership (Seymour 2017; Whiteley et al. 2019). The party's 2017 general election manifesto commitments to nationalisation and anti-austerity attracted widespread support (Pitts & Dinerstein 2017) challenging neoliberal orthodoxy (Worth 2019). Nevertheless, Crisp et al. (2019) suggest the party's efforts to ameliorate the effects of neoliberalism will take time and require a sustained expansion of its industrial and regional economic strategy, to accelerate this process.

## Conclusion

A substantial proportion of academics, politicians and journalists appeared to be caught off-guard by the UK's decision in the June 2016 referendum to leave the EU. It is important to recognise that this was a relatively marginal victory for the leave campaign: 52% to 48%. Furthermore, the leave campaign's willingness and ability to honestly and accurately predict what Brexit would mean in practice for the UK population was questionable, especially around important issues such as National Health Service (NHS) funding and trade relations with the EU. While we recognise these issues, they did not appear as overly important themes in the interviews we conducted with people on Teesside in the deindustrialised North East of England who had (except one abstention) voted to leave the EU. Instead, three central lines of argument emerged from the research which are as follows:

- (a) The effects of neoliberalism on working-class life over the last 40 years provide an important explanatory framework for the vote;
- (b) The Labour Party's abandonment of the working class appears to be a principal reason why these people voted to leave;
- (c) The EU referendum offered a unique opportunity for working-class people to voice their dissatisfaction with the dominant social, cultural and political hegemon in contemporary England.

The findings render it difficult to escape the conclusion that for these working-class citizens the Brexit vote had only a limited association with the EU itself. The

dearth of discussion about the EU and the equally striking desire to share and contextualise personal and collective experiences of the neoliberal era and the political abandonment of ordinary men and women are both key findings. In addition, the article outlines the epistemological weaknesses associated with the methods of 'abstracted empiricism' frequently used to analyse the Brexit vote. By characterising the working class as intellectually deficient and unthinking subjects duped by certain elements of the media, and by reducing their everyday, long-term shared experiential realities to individual emotional states (see Bergmann 2018; Campanella & Dassu 2019; D'Ancona 2018; Patel & Connelly 2019; Poutvaara & Steinhardt 2018; Stone 2017; Swami et al. 2018; Zavala et al. 2017; Zhang 2017), the contexts underlying the nuanced sentiments that were such a striking feature of this study have remained relatively unexplored.

Indeed, as Behr (2018) reflected in *The Guardian* recently, 'I knew many people don't vote. I should have asked why'. This absence of enquiry is not unique to journalists. Our contribution to this debate has been to identify the context that generates attitudes among a specific section of the working class and to interpret these attitudes alongside a broader academic literature that frames the changing situation of the working class in post-industrial England. The fundamental finding was repeated throughout the interviews – political abandonment.

The EU referendum appeared to offer a unique opportunity for change in the eyes of a group that generally felt resigned to their lack of control over the nation's political economy. Perhaps the most important issue here is the role of the political left in persistently failing to defend the interests of the working class. Our participants essentially agreed with Hall's (2012) argument that Labour politicians had granted themselves 'special liberty' in order to serve interests other than those of the working class. New Labour had ensured the continuation of neoliberalism and its attendant privatisation, economic liberalisation and transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich. The 2008 global economic crash marks a historic missed opportunity for the UK's political left to re-engage with their traditional working-class political base and, thereby, replace neoliberalism with a more redistributive form of political economy. Taken together, these political developments have substantially weakened the connection of this localised section of the working class to the political left. For the participants in this study the Brexit vote highlights the strength of feeling about political abandonment and social dislocation among sections of the working class in Teesside. Importantly, other qualitative research in leave locales that have endured deindustrialisation, lost hope and political discontent corroborate these findings (Davenport et al. 2018; Dawson 2018; Koch 2017; McKenzie 2017a, 2017b; Mahoney & Kearon 2018; Willett et al. 2019). However, we have unveiled further nuance associated with Teesside's political economy and local history. The continued absence of an effective strategy to manage or reverse the transition to post-industrialism in the region has been rightly perceived by our participants as a lack of interest in the future of the area when compared to other priorities in the UK's political economy, such as the health of the investment banking sector. This, in turn, resulted in the desire for a significant change of direction expressed through the 2016 Brexit vote.



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