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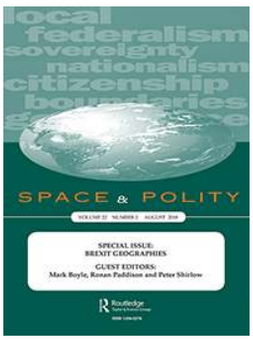

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Julie MacLeavy

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Women, equality and the UK's EU referendum: locating the gender politics of Brexit in relation to the neoliberalising state

Julie MacLeavy

School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper uses a feminist state-theoretical approach to explore the development of Brexit and argues that the UK's EU referendum and its aftermath reflect a gendered politics embedded within the ongoing neoliberal restructuring of the state. Directing attention to the struggle to protect women's interests, maintain equality strategies, and more generally infuse a gender dimension in political discussions, the paper emphasizes the risks of Brexit for women and gender equality. It concludes by asking how at the current conjecture – when European regulation on gender equality is being framed as 'stifling' economic growth – we can build up a fairer and more equal United Kingdom.

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1. Introduction

The aftermath of the 2016 referendum vote in favour of Britain leaving the European Union has seen a renewed focus on 'contemporary economic losers' (Hozić & True, 2017, p. 273). These are social groups united by a sense of insecurity and marginalization in a context where neoliberal economic restructuring has been accompanied by the institution of austerity measures and a movement away from collectivized forms of welfare support that previously sought to alleviate inequalities of labour, class and (most recently) gender. Indeed, the dominant thesis holds that the Brexit vote was the product of widening socio-economic divisions in the UK (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; O'Reilly, 2016). The result had as much to do with rising inequality and stalled social mobility as the political and economic relationship of Britain and the EU (Harris, 2016). This is evidenced by the high level of support for the leave campaign amongst those who have 'suffered' as a result of neoliberal economic policies, not only lower educated men in the industrial sector (Colantone & Stanig, 2016), but also white middle-class constituents that voted to leave on account of the relative loss of privilege they have experienced (see Swales, 2016 on the different leave voters). Gender has featured in this analysis, with an emergent focus on the fate of the 'common man' – worried about his pay packet, hurting from austerity and scared by immigration – in mainstream accounts (see, for example, Foster, 2016; Hamilton, 2016; Qvortrup, 2016). However, the priority afforded

CONTACT Julie MacLeavy Julie.Macleavy@bristol.ac.uk

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to the experiences of (white) men has meant both the dynamics of economic restructuring and the political and socio-cultural changes responsible for continuing inequality for women in the UK have been neglected and there has been relatively little attention paid to women's issues (and other minority rights) in the exit negotiations.

Against this background, the paper critically explores the Brexit vote from a feminist perspective. Drawing on Jessop's (1990, 1997, 2001, 2002) Strategic Relational Approach (SRA), it examines the role women played in the referendum debate, noting the absence of women's voices in political campaigns and the prominence of issues related to economic security, immigration, defence and trade compared to matters concerning gender equality and women's rights. The notion of strategic selectivity that is advanced within the SRA is then used to explore the EU as a structure that activates specific powers and state capacities in the pursuit of gender equality (see also Jessop, 2004). In particular, the paper focuses on the ensemble of institutions, social forces and activities organized around (or involved in) the development of gender equality across EU member states. As part of this, the institutionalization of 'moderate liberal feminism' that supports rather than challenges neoliberal norms is noted (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Prugl, 2015). By helping to expand economic opportunities, increase political engagement and encourage ideational change, the EU principle of gender mainstreaming is orientated towards the inclusion of women within the existing gendered structures of neoliberal capitalism. Thus it contributes to material practices which reduce women's empowerment to autonomy in the market. At the national level, gender mainstreaming provides for an approach that supports women's waged labour, work-life balance initiatives and the participation of women in policy-making realms. This fuels a process of 'feminization' that undermines claims of continued gender oppression, at the same time as legitimizing austerity-driven reforms including changes to welfare provisions and the reduction of public sector employment, which disproportionately impact women (Hall, 2018). Whilst some argue that Brexit allows for new models of welfare reform (Cottam, 2018), a new industrial strategy to tackle weak productivity (Crafts, 2017), market protectionism (Lindstrom, 2018) and a Shared Prosperity Fund (EDF, 2018), which are more pro-worker – and potentially pro-equality – the analysis undertaken here shows an ongoing ambivalence towards feminist critiques of the structural inequalities of austere neoliberal capitalism and a failure to pursue the political and economic transformations these critiques demand.

By directing attention to the struggle to protect women's interests, maintain equality strategies, and more generally to infuse a gender dimension to discussions about mainstream EU policies, where gender is still largely overlooked in favour of revanchist narratives about 'taking back control', the paper emphasizes the risks of Brexit for both women and gender equality. With austerity in the UK increasingly understood to be a political choice rather than an economic necessity (Corbyn, 2018; McDonnell, 2016), the paper points towards the consequences of the loss of the EU as an actor in markets and the further expansion of the power of the private market through policies of privatization and deregulation. By demonstrating how the gender selectivity of the state has been elaborated within the Brexit negotiations, the paper suggests that Brexit is a critical moment in which gender relations are being reshaped. It concludes by asking how at the current conjecture – when European legislation and regulation on gender equality is being framed as 'stifling' economic growth through 'excessive red-tape' – we can

protect recent feminist gains through the EU and build up a fairer and more equal UK outside Europe.

2. A feminist state-theoretical approach

The invisibility of gender issues and the largely strategic deployment of women in the Stay and Leave campaigns antecedent to the EU referendum have been augmented by the prominence of discourses about an alienated working class, nationalism and a 'whitelash' (Kellner, 2017) in the immediate aftermath. As a consequence, the gendered complexities of the Brexit debate and the intersection of gender with the race and class hierarchies that condition individual life chances need to be unearthed (Hozić & True, 2017). The SRA advances a compelling means of analysing how the revival of the nation state project, as evident from Brexit, is being achieved through the reification of a class politics articulated through a politics of race, and how the power balance between different political factions within the state is affecting the nature and effects of this project. In directing attention to the ways in which state projects are shaped by and reproduced through elite political practice, the SRA identifies the impact of the largely white, male elites in delivering the referendum result via the promotion of specific narratives that hinder the ability of marginalized others to make their voices heard (see McRobie, 2016; Mortimer, 2016; Shabi, 2016). In doing so, it reveals not only how the effective exclusion of women of all classes and races from the referendum debate led to 'an outcome unreflective of the range of views and experiences from within and across social groups' (Hozić & True, 2017, p. 272), but also how the Brexit project that is now being advanced by different social forces within and beyond the state system neglects gender issues by failing to assess the prospects for gender equality in both targeted equality initiatives and mainstream policy areas (such as economic and monetary policy, security and defence) that have long been shown to have unintended gender consequences (Guerrina, 2016).

The SRA is a resolutely state-theoretical but not state-centric approach (Jessop, 2002). It is used here to examine the distinctive material, social and spatio-temporal features of the Brexit vote as 'a singular *event* that is one symptom of a *continuing organic crisis* of the British state' (Jessop, 2017, original emphasis). Within this perspective, the institutional materiality of the state is understood to be substantiated through capitalist social relations of production and social reproduction (Jessop, 1990; Poulantzas, 1978). In treating the state as a contingency of specific articulations of power relations, the SRA denies the state any a priori existence, but instead directs attention to the practices through which the (crisis of the) state is brought into existence. The SRA is therefore used to identify the conditions that specifically and differentially impact on the ability of various political forces to pursue particular interests and strategies through the state, with specific reference to the spatial–temporal context of Brexit.

The methodology was determined by the requirements of the SRA, namely to reveal how and under which conditions elites were able to (re)formulate a national state-based project that gained majority support in the referendum vote. In order to understand the binary divide between 'us' and 'them' which was made manifest in narratives of populist nationhood discourse, qualitative methods were employed, namely discourse and content analysis of the Stay and Leave campaigns, and political speeches made by proponents and opponents of Brexit from the announcement of the EU referendum date in February 2016

to the agreement of the 'breakthrough' deal in December 2017.[1] This analysis was cross-referenced with national and UK-orientated media coverage of matters concerning gender equality and women's rights prior to the referendum and in the period following.[2] In particular, the research sought to understand the role of women in the referendum process and the status of women's issues looking specifically at public policy pertaining to paid employment and the social reproduction of families and communities.

The analysis was informed by Purvis and Hunt's (1993) approach to ideology, which accords central prominence to semiotic processes that reinforce or reproduce dominant social relations. Ideology in this context is viewed as a product of 'discursive formations' (Foucault, 1972), which involve the production of meaning and truth claims. This framework directs attention to the political discourses which channel (as opposed to control) possibilities for social understanding by facilitating certain social comprehensions whilst impeding other, often contradictory, interpretations. It grasps the ways in which language and other forms of social semiotics do not merely convey social experience but play a major part in constituting social subjects (through the formation of subjectivities and associated identities), their relations and the fields in which they exist. As such, it reveals how the spread of ideas relating to the nation composed political and public opinion positions on British membership of the EU and the continued resonance of these gendered and racialised discourses of nationhood in the exit negotiations.

Since the SRA implies the need for a historical understanding of the process of policy making (which can include a policy of indifference) (Jessop, 2015), consideration of the political context in which the referendum occurred is necessary to fully comprehend the development of Brexit as a *gendered state crisis*. To contextualize the discourse and content analysis, the paper next considers the gender politics of what has been termed 'the state of enduring austerity' (Seymour, 2014), noting the tensions around social reproduction, social mobility and social cohesion it has generated. In particular, it outlines how the shift from a Keynesian welfare state to a Schumpeterian workfare regime, which has been made manifest in the state of enduring austerity, is a gendered transformation, involving the reprivatisation of social reproduction (Bakker, 2003) and the greater exploitation of women in the public economic realm (Walby, 2015).

3. Austerity and the politics of gender

In the UK, government policies of austerity have shifted national gender regimes towards more neoliberal forms (Walby, 2015). Under the governments of Prime Ministers Cameron and May, there has been an emphasis on low inflation and fiscal consolidation over public spending to create employment. This 'deflationary bias' has undermined livelihoods with implications for both women's contribution to the paid labour market and the unpaid care economy in which women continue to assume the majority burden (Elson & Cagatay, 2000; Lewis, 2002). Alongside the deflationary bias, the idea that public provision needs to be reduced through the reduction of public expenditure or the privatization of previously state-produced services has taken hold. This 'commodification bias' has impacted the resources of gender equality politics and institutions that might otherwise have countered the impacts of unemployment by ensuring women have a safety net to support their families financially and enable them to cope with the social and familial consequences of an economy in which full employment is no longer a priority.[3] The

reduction of public sector support is based on measures of 'efficiency' and 'value for money' that do not account for non-market costs and benefits. The net outcome of this is the individualization of risk (see Elson, 2002). There has been a move away from shared responsibility for managing social risks through collective pooling mechanisms towards more individualized responsibility for managing life course risks or transitions, and women have been disproportionately affected.

Indeed, the decision to reduce government deficits by cutting spending rather than increasing taxation has served to further entrench gender inequality by invoking the 'male breadwinner bias' that was common in the 1950s when welfare states were built (Elson & Cagatay, 2000; see also Bakker, Elson, & Young, 2011). This assumes that unpaid care work will be performed by women who are dependents of a male breadwinner, without recognizing the fact that women's labour market participation has risen significantly and is increasingly necessary for households to enjoy a rudimentary standard of living (MacLeavy, 2011; McDowell, 2005). In the UK, cuts to social security (notably the reduction of the household benefits cap to £23,000 a year, the freezing of most benefits and tax credits, and the removal of housing support from 18 to 21 year olds) have been introduced as job cuts in the public sector have reduced the opportunities for women to combine a career with caring responsibilities. In particular, the decrease of the public sector has changed the nature of the labour market, by first removing a number of relatively secure employment posts offering flexible working patterns and access to a decent pension scheme, and by second making the public sector a less family-friendly place to work. With fewer workers employed to do the same amount of work in the public sector, worker stress is increasing and there is mounting pressure to work long(er) hours (Barber, 2010).

Public service austerity is therefore impacting women in two key ways. Not only is it undermining public provisions in support of unpaid care work for which women continue to assume the majority burden, it is also reducing the sources of paid employment in which women are overrepresented as a result of their caring responsibilities. Women are twice as likely as men to work in the public sector (with four in ten women working in a public sector role) (TUC, 2012) and historically have earned considerably more than those in the private sector, in large part because 42% of female public sector workers are in high skilled jobs, such as nursing or teaching, compared with 16% in the private sector (Wild, 2015). Historically the gender pay gap in the public sector has also been smaller, although a three-year pay freeze, below-inflation pay offers and a reduction in the number of high skilled jobs have hampered progress towards equal pay. As a consequence, it has been posited that austerity constitutes a 'critical juncture' for gender relations that could imply reversal in the improvement of gender equality in the UK (Rubery & Karamessini, 2014).

In addition to the detrimental impact on the gender pay gap of job losses arising out of cuts in public services, current austerity measures are contributing to the low labour market participation of women in dual earner families with a median income, and the segregation of many women from low income and single parent households in a 'secondary earners' labour market of jobs with low incomes and few prospects (MacLeavy, 2011; Rubery & Rafferty, 2013). The shift from a Keynesian welfare state to a Schumpeterian workfare regime, which established the primacy of the notion that work can alleviate poverty and enable social mobility, has been developed in this period of austerity with a

redesign of a range of means-tested elements of the social security and tax credits system for those both in and out of employment. Assessment of income and assets is now joint and both partners have to fulfil work-related eligibility conditions in order to claim social security support (Bennett & Sung, 2013). To some extent, this could be seen to meet feminist demands to support women's autonomy and independence through labour market participation. However, many 'second earners' face higher losses from each (additional) pound of wages than they did under the previous system leading to the re-emergence of a male breadwinner model at the middle of the income distribution and a one-and-a-half breadwinner model in which men work full-time and women part-time in the lower deciles (MacLeavy, 2011; Rubery, 2010). The discursively gender-blind approach fails to challenge the traditional gender division of labour which makes it more likely that the woman is the secondary earner for assessment purposes (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2016). This has consequences not just for women, but for men and society as a whole. Ongoing gender inequality undermines the inclusion and participation of women, destabilizing social networks and compromising the social mobility of millions of women and their families.

The contributory role of ongoing gender inequality in voting patterns and behaviours is not well documented. However, statistical and spatial analysis using the gender income gap as a proxy for women's economic autonomy – shown by Strøm (2012) to be related to women's electoral behaviour – reveals an inverse relationship between the gender income gap and the vote to remain in the EU. As Zucherman (2017) reports, the smaller the gender pay gap, the higher the vote to remain (and the lower the vote to leave). Unevenly distributed across space, the impacts of eight years of austerity are traced through the geography of Brexit. In England, the North, Midlands and the South have distinct gender-differentiated voting patterns and behaviours that map onto persistent place-based variations in acceptable forms of working-class masculinity, and gender-coded work/care norms (on which see Boyer, Dermott, James, & MacLeavy, 2017a, 2017b). Traditional and historic labour structures, the more recent de-industrialisation of the North and Midlands, and the progressive implementation of policies that shift increasingly more care burdens to women (whilst also compelling them to become valued economic actors) are made manifest in the different needs and the expectations that voters have when casting their ballots. The places where the greatest proportion of leave votes were cast (including the Welsh Valleys, Sunderland, Doncaster and areas of the West Midlands) represent places where the gender pay gap is highest. The places that voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU are places with a low gender pay gap, or as was the case in Scotland not enough variation to support finer grained analysis (Zucherman, 2017).[4]

Austerity measures have not been gender neutral. Women, particularly those from low income households, have borne the brunt of a renewed focus on raising employment rates, rather than improving job quality or facilitating care (Rubery & Rafferty, 2013). While the line of policy direction from the state differs according to the income and family situation of women, the general approach has been to promote paid employment, whilst underplaying the barriers to women's participation in the paid labour market. Fertility, childcare and work choices are constructed as private matters providing for the reduction or removal of public support for the daily and generational reproduction of the labour force and inducing many women to work a 'double day', labouring in both the workplace and the home (Hochschild & Machung, 2003; Perrons, Fagan, McDowell, Ray, & Ward, 2006). Austerity

measures are also gendered in the sense that there is something 'inherently masculine' about the values and objectives guiding neoliberalism, which the UK state sought to preserve following the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and certain factions promoted heavily in the run up to the EU referendum and its immediate aftermath (Bruff & Wöhl, 2016). Indeed, the principles of competition, growth and fiscal discipline that are traced in moves to reduce budget deficits without sacrificing economic development are also emergent in the proto-Brexit UK state and based on ethics historically considered to be masculine.

While the politics of austerity draws on neoliberal tenets that have seen an erosion of traditional gender roles and their institutionalization since the 1980s, the transfer of reproductive responsibilities towards the feminized spheres of the home and community has led to an intensification of gender in the current conjecture. This simultaneously and necessarily implicates new gendered forms of subjectivation. These new forms of subjectivity shape women's interactions with the state and politics. Relegated to the private sphere, women participate less in decision-making spaces and have less access to the public economic realm, which works to the detriment of their rights as citizens. In making an unpaid and invisible contribution to social cohesion, women are denied social entitlements on an equal basis with men (Elson, 2002).

4. Gendering Brexit: analysis of the EU referendum campaign

After a protracted period of austerity involving a transformation of what might be termed the neoliberal gender regime, the 2016 EU referendum saw a further re-masculinisation of the state and politics. Analysis of the Stay and Leave campaigns, associated political speeches and media content points towards the renegotiation and regeneration of ideas associated with neoliberal patriarchy (Enloe, 2017). In particular, it reveals the priorities and silences which have meant that gender equality is side-lined in pursuit of higher political and economic goals (Rubery and Karamessini, 2014; Walby, 2015). Conducted to identify substantive and peripheral content, recurrent themes and discourses, the analysis reveals the beliefs and values that were invoked to gain support for Britain's withdrawal from the EU, as well as some notable silences. 'Sovereignty', 'freedom', 'control' and 'money' stood out as recurrent themes, appearing in a large majority of material produced by the Leave campaign, often allied with evocations of (English) nationalism and closely associated with anti-immigrant sentiments as a result the focused efforts of UKIP to mobilize public support. Whilst the mainstream Leave campaign sought to make a case for Brexit as an opportunity to improve the political administration, UKIP distain for EU supranationalism led to the portrayal of a 'state in crisis' (Jessop, 2012). One might compare the following statements as exemplifying this subtle distinction. In the first co-convenor of the Leave campaign committee, MP Michael Gove, takes exception to the influence of the EU in the different areas of economic, industrial and immigration policy. In the second, MEP Nigel Farage, then leader of UKIP, calls for action to (re)gain control of UK borders expressing fear that continued immigration could leave to violence on the streets:

> [M]embership of the European Union prevents us being able to change huge swathes of law and stops us being able to choose who makes critical decisions which affect all our lives …

> whoever is in Government in London cannot remove or reduce VAT, cannot support a steel plant through troubled times, cannot build the houses we need where they're needed and cannot deport all the individuals who shouldn't be in this country.
>
> (Gove, 2016a)

> I think it's legitimate to say that if people feel they have lost control completely, and we have lost control of our borders completely as members of the EU, and if people feel that voting doesn't change anything then violence is the next step. I find it difficult to contemplate it happening here, but nothing's impossible
>
> (Farage, 2016)

Both quotes are focused around the issue of 'control' – but whilst the first quote laments a loss of law-making powers to the EU, the second goes further in suggesting the potentially destabilizing effects of UK participation in European policy agreements.

Indeed, the Leave campaigns slogan 'taking back control' was linked to specific issues like freedom of movement, trade agreements and tariffs. The Stay campaign never coined a simple and effective slogan but made a case for Britain being stronger in the Europe by connecting EU membership to 'security', 'economic prosperity', and 'global influence'. In his final speech before the referendum, then Prime Minister David Cameron explained his support for the Stay campaign in the following terms:

> Above all, its about our economy. It will be stronger if we stay … And its also about our national security too … Being a member of the European Union also gives us strength in the world … [The EU] amplifies our power.
>
> (Cameron, 2016a)

The Stay campaign posters also focused on the influence Britain gained by being a member of the EU. One showed a negotiating table bringing to life the idea that the Europe provides Britain with 'a seat at the table' and an opportunity to feed into supranational decision-making (see Figure 1). Another depicted a grey stairway to an open door that led to a corridor of darkness implying that voting to leave the EU represents a step into

Figure 1. Remain poster featuring an empty chair, with the heading 'Leave Europe and we lose our seat at the table' and the tagline 'Don't give up our place in the world. Britain is stronger in Europe'.

Figure 2. M&C Saatchi's Stronger In poster featuring a door that leads into darkness and has the headline 'Leave and there's no going back'.

the political unknown (see Figure 2). The Stay campaign did not allude to a European spirit or sense of belonging (perhaps unsurprising given the historically negative press coverage of Europe in the UK), but instead focused on the domestic advantages of EU membership. It proposed that Britain's withdrawal from Europe would place jobs at risk, cause prices to rise and in turn necessitate the extension of austerity measures.

In viewing discourse as enabling a process of meaning making and ideology as an effect of this process (Purvis & Hunt, 1993), the analysis proceeded to trace the principles of sovereignty, freedom, control, security, economic prosperity and global influence through the substantive content of the Stay and Leave campaigns to identify the gender regime that shaped the EU referendum campaign. This showed the background effects of the new politics of austerity, with a broader marginalization of concerns about social justice and equality in the political discourse prior to the vote. Aside from a detailed discussion of women's rights and gender-equality issues on International Women's Day 2016, the analysis revealed a political and policy blindness to gender at this critical juncture (see also CRCC, 2016). There was limited acknowledgement of the EU as a key driver of gender equality policy in Europe, or the access to special EU funding for achieving gender equality targets and objectives that membership conferred. While Employment Minister Priti Patel MP speaking at the launch of the anti-EU group Women for Britain pointed to the potential influence of women from across the political spectrum in the referendum, her reference to the gains made by the suffragettes in securing an extension of the right to vote in public elections was intended to suggest the power of women acting outside the state and thus promote a vote to leave as a means of radical women 'taking back control' (see Patel, 2016). It fell to oppositional women's movements (e.g. Women In) to draw attention to the potential impact of Brexit on women's rights in the UK and the nature of the British gender regime which positions women as a marginal constituency (Guerrina, 2017).

The EU referendum crystallised rather than challenged existing gender inequality through the obfuscation of social marginalization and gendered poverty in the UK. In a context of austerity, which has weakened women's position in the labour market and public sphere, core feminist concerns with the patriarchal roots of gender inequality were found to be subordinated to neoliberal concerns with efficiency, productivity, development and employment. The situation was compounded by shifts in governance that have changed the ways in which feminist organizations interact with the state (Kantola & Squires, 2012). Major women's organizations and policy agencies sought to highlight the risks of Brexit for gender equality and drew attention to the absence of key indicators or a gender impact assessment in the campaign materials of both sides. In seeking to project an image of the EU as a gender actor and a positive force for the employment rights of women, the Fawcett Society called for the government to provide evidence of the impact of Brexit on different demographic groups (launching the non-partizan, Brexit-neutral action #FaceHerFuture, details of which may be found at www.faceherfuture.co.uk). Similarly, the Women's Equality Party acting in tandem with the Green Party made a case for gender mainstreaming as an important tool for achieving gender equality (WEP, 2017). In both instances, however, the dominant frame when discussing gender equality was a neoliberal one, which constituted gender relations in particular marketed forms.

A final step in the analysis was to look towards target audiences and implicit oppositions within the EU referendum campaign, often clearly signalled in political speeches and essays. This pointed towards the importance of economic restructuring in shaping a key constituency of voters located in the middle and lower deciles of the income distribution. With the deregulation of the labour market and the dismantling of the unions leading to the rise of low-paid, insecure employment in all sectors, a number of white working men are now experiencing conditions that have long been inhabited by women, and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (Bhambra, 2017). The Leave campaign addressed these constituents as 'real', 'ordinary' or 'decent' people and sought to engage them with invocations of the times past when the labour market offered relatively secure and reasonably well-paid jobs to members of the white working class. Alluding to the historical strength of the British economy, the Leave campaign sought to link the future prospects of the nation with the days of empire and exploration. There was reference to Britain as 'the best customer' (Gove, 2016b, p. 12) and the implication that the citizens of the country had little to lose by voting to leave the European trading bloc. In this, the divisions between working-class men and the feminized latecomers to the market were notably absent. The primary focus was on class and inequality, with an assumed 'whiteness' of the 'left behind' effect (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Rajan-Rankin, 2017).

In their appeal for Britain to remain within the EU, the Stay campaign framed Vote Leavers as 'quitters' (Cameron, 2016b), softening President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Junker's emotional ascription of the Leave campaign supporters as 'deserters' (see Holehouse, 2016). They did not engage with the significant losses of globalization that were noted by proponents of the Leave campaign nor propose remedies under the current infrastructure. European integration was presented as an unquestionable good, with no concession to concerns about the feminist projects which have entered into state policies, notably gender mainstreaming. Described as the institutionalization of feminist projects in

order to eliminate gender inequality (Walby, 2011, p. 99), gender mainstreaming requires a gender perspective to be integrated into every stage of policy process – design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. It has secured a reduction of inequalities in the labour market but had the effect of increasing inequality between women as middle-class women tend to be favoured by labour market interventions, whilst working-class women are not and may suffer a further decrease in income if the male breadwinner within a traditional family arrangement is disfavoured by policies that support women's employment (Crușmac, 2015). Indeed, there have been calls for actions to ensure substantive rather than formal equality through differential treatment in some instances. This recognizes that gender mainstreaming prioritizes the labour market participation of women thereby supporting a neoliberal agenda (Elomäki, 2015). It does not address the unequal division of domestic labour, which remains the most intractable impediment to gender inequality (Walby, 2005).

5. The post-Brexit gender regime

Following the referendum result, the longevity of the EU's equality framework has been in doubt. Notwithstanding the ongoing need for policies that go beyond the labour market (or the reconciliation of work and family in the lives of women), European legislation has provided a number of important employment standards based on the principle of gender equality (including equal pay and equal treatment in occupational pension schemes, pregnancy and maternity rights, equal treatment for part-time workers). In this respect, the EU is an organization that supports specific powers and state capacities in the pursuit of gender equality (Walby, 2004). Its 'gender machinery' includes both formal legally binding norms, institutional actors and expert networks, as well as informal statements, declarations and practices that enable feminist bureaucrats to progress the principle of gender equality in member states (Woodward & van der Vleuten, 2014). Leaving the EU thus constitutes a risk to gender equality as the UK has no comparable influential institutions to those furthering equality at the European regional level (Cohen, 2017).

The British government's approach to the Article 50 negotiations underlines the invisibility of women in the Brexit environment with just one woman (Catherine Webb, Director of Market Access and Budget) on the nine-strong negotiating team. Not only has gender been all but erased from the discourse and the proposed strategies in government policy, but the low level of women's representation constitutes an enduring failure to represent a more diverse set of interests and priorities in the political realm (reinforcing the bias emergent as a result of the disproportionate 'pale and male' campaigners directing the Brexit debate). This is perhaps unsurprising given that the state of enduring austerity has weakened women's position in the public sphere, as well as in grassroots movements. Austerity reinforces longer-term shifts involving the transfer of power from democratically-elected actors to national and transnational bureaucracy meaning that decisions are increasingly made in male-dominated institutions that are governed by masculine norms (Elson & Cagatay, 2000). However, recent research suggests that feminists are 'working in the spaces of power' (Newman, 2012) to challenge austerity and reintroduce a feminist perspective in decision-making (Chilcott, 2018).

Withdrawal from the EU presents a number of challenges to women and gender equality, the resolution of which will shape the UK's post-Brexit gender regime. Reflecting on the historical development of national equality legislation is useful in pointing towards which rights or resolutions are vulnerable as a consequence of the deregulatory agenda proposed. Whilst UK legislation on race discrimination, equal pay and disability pre-date EU Directives in these areas, priority was historically afforded to business interests over the principles of equality and justice in the labour market (Guerrina & Murphy, 2016). It is as a result of EU law that the domestic regime has been developed to include protection against all forms of discrimination and to guarantee rights the rights of workers through the introduction of working time protections, the protection of agency, fixed term and part-time workers, and the institution of health and safety measures amongst many other initiatives (see Engender, 2016). The EU has thus been pivotal in establishing a neoliberal gender regime in which workers are afforded certain rights and protections. In a period of global deregulation, it has facilitated the increase of women in the public economic sphere and helped to close the gender gap in employment, although there remains variation in the uptake of employment related to social class and area, including evidence of a return to prevailing gender norms in parts of the country where stimulus packages introduced in the aftermath of the global financial crisis have reinforced the (male) workforce of the automobile and construction industries (Périvier, 2018).

When compared to the European states of Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Cyprus where budgetary austerity enforced by the troika[5] resulted in austerity policies which aim to increase labour market flexibility through deregulation, austerity in the UK has been more focused on spending cuts which modify the welfare state and gender regime by inducing a return to familial care arrangements and increased reliance on the unpaid domestic labour of women (Périvier, 2018; Rubery & Karamessini, 2014). Following the removal of EU structures, a post-Brexit government would have the legal autonomy to rescind the policies and instruments that have until now 'softened' the neoliberal gender regime jeopardizing moves towards gender equality. While Theresa May promises a great expansion in worker rights (see Conservative and Unionist Party, 2017), there is no explicit reference to women and the exact policy instruments and preventions to ensure their employment rights after Brexit (Vida, 2017). Instead, the negotiations are about securing the UK's economic and political power in a (gender)neutral way. The absence of the gender reflects statements by Gove (2016c) and Johnson (2016) in the run up to the election specifying an ambition to remove the 'red-tape' that was costing the country £600 million per week[6] through the eradication of working time regulations, staff protections and state-sponsored benefits (including parental and maternity leave) and health and safety enactments. Similar proposals were made by Conservative MPs Christopher Chope and Priti Patel, as well as David Cameron's former adviser Steve Holton (see Ford, 2016). Moreover, the group Economists for Brexit made a case for Britain to leave the EU based on the potential cost savings to be achieved through the eradication of gender equality and working time rights, along with changes to health and safety regulations which found party support (Economists for Brexit, 2016).

With European legislation and regulation on gender equality framed as inhibiting economic growth, the post-Brexit environment is likely to see the simultaneous intensification and erosion of gender. Should the UK government deregulation fail to enact sufficient legal

protection to compensate for the removal of EU laws, directives and charters, the prior neoliberal tendencies of individualization and the transfer of reproductive responsibilities towards the feminized spaces of communities and families – renewed in part through the implementation of austerity measures in recent years – will no longer be restricted by the promotion and implementation of gender equality policies. At the same time, deregulation and the reprivatisation of social reproduction is likely to affect not just women, but a number of feminized individuals upon whom the burden of additional care work falls. The dimensions of class, race and ethnicity mean that any change in the gender regime will affect constituted groups differently. In this sense, Brexit as articulated in the period between the announcement of the EU referendum date in February 2016 to the agreement of the 'breakthrough' deal in December 2017 indicates the significant intensification of the practices that reflect and reproduce gendered labour and economic inequality.

6. Conclusion

Using a feminist state theoretical approach to explore the development of Brexit, this paper argues that the EU referendum and its aftermath reflect a gendered politics, which is embedded within the neoliberal restructuring of the state and austerity. Whether the gender regime implicit in this politics is institutionalized post-Brexit remains to be seen and will depend on the potential effects of Brexit on women's rights and gender equality being contested. Much relies on the politicization and refusal of the gendered interpellations inherent in current discourse, which this paper seeks to make visible. The challenge for women's organizations and pro-European advocacy groups[7] lies in highlighting the fact that the economic insecurity and cultural anxiety that gave rise to Brexit are, through its management, being displaced onto gendered subjects. Not only are inequalities growing in the UK, but this is taking place in a context of increasing hostility and prejudice towards socially and economically disadvantaged individuals and groups, amongst them many women.

Insofar as the vote to leave represents mounting dissatisfaction with the detrimental social and economic effects of neoliberalism, the emergence of the proto-Brexit UK state is testament to the vortex-like power of the political machinery and policy making processes of neoliberalism (Crouch, 2017). Indeed, the paper demonstrates that the gendered norms, orders and policies that were amplified at the time of the EU referendum are consistent with a neoliberal masculine register, which enfolds dissent through the co-option of nationalistic, racist and other exclusionary frames emanating from UKIP and the radical right (Worth, 2018). The paper also shows the different ways forces acted in and through the state are seeking to establish strategic selectivity in ways that support neoliberal interests in the aftermath of the vote to leave. In this way, the paper contributes to the literature on the SRA an account of how political actors and organizations implement and mediate statecraft and social policy and the gendered political subject formations and material gendered effects this necessarily fosters. Importantly, a gendered state-theoretical approach that analyses social forces, hegemonic projects and their specific actors can provide for a more holistic political-economic analysis, because it takes into account how gender as a social relation and as a category of analysis is structured by and is structuring capitalist societies within a nation-state setting (see also Wöhl, 2014).

The paper points towards the reconstitution of gendered austerity as the most dominant response to post-referendum indeterminancy. Making the case for Europe's democratic values and its commitment to social justice will depend on both the popularization of a feminist campaign in which gender equality as a main goal is rendered legitimate, as well as the incorporation of a feminist ethic within the auspices of the state. This latter task is becoming increasingly difficult given the support expressed for the repatriation of European powers by previously pro-European factions (see, for example, Corbyn, 2017). However, Brexit could pave the way for the promotion and implementation of gender equality initiatives that go beyond the EU's gender mainstreaming strategy as a transformative policy tool. In spite of the gains made by the EU on gender equality and human rights, entrenched gender roles sustain the dynamic of women's disadvantage and thus need to be addressed. Activities that raise public consciousness of the gender conventions that underlie continued patterns of discrimination are a start and may in turn allow new forms of solidarity to come to the fore. There is a need to not only ensure the maintenance of women's rights in a post-Brexit environment, but to achieve gender justice by addressing, for instance, cuts in childcare and services, the lack of access to paid parental leave, tax and welfare reforms, the gender pay gap and the rise of zero-hour contracts which we have seen enforced in and through the state of enduring austerity (Seymour, 2014).

Notes

1. These include speeches by the Former Prime Minister David Cameron, current Prime Minister Theresa May, Leader of the Opposition Jeremy Corbyn, Former Leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) Nigel Farage, Former Secretary of State for Existing the European Union David Davis, Secretary of State for International Trade Liam Fox, Former Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Boris Johnson, and Former Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities Justine Greening. Speeches were identified from press reports and keyword searching of the gov.uk website, which contains an archive of the all speeches organized by government department, policy area and date. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/announcements?keywords=&announcement_filter_option=speeches&topics%5B%5D=all&departments%5B%5D=all&world_locations%5B%5D=all&from_date=&to_date=. Essays included those published by Portland Communications. Portland's archive is available here: https://portland-communications.com/?chapters=destination-brexit The broadcast archive of television and radio programmes that relate to the subject in the period from when the date the referendum was announced to the end of June 2016 provided a further source of empirical data. This broadcast archive is available here: http://blogs.bl.uk/thenewsroom/2016/07/brexit-the-broadcast-archive.html. Finally, the joint British Library and LSE Library Brexit Collection of campaigning leaflets provided access to a number of leaflets produced by organizations, political parties and individuals at this time. Details of this collection and the wider set of archives concerning the long and complex relationship between Britain and the EU are available here: https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/collections/brexit/2016.
2. These were gathered through Lexus-Nexus, a subscription-based database that collects news articles and allows users to search article content and headlines for specific words and phrases. Information about Lexus-Nexus is available at: https://www.lexisnexis.com/en- us/gateway.page.
3. This may include care for men whose self-esteem was bound up in the paid job they have lost and whom are depressed, in poor health and/or acting destructively (for a longer discussion see McDowell, 2003, on the 'crisis of masculinity').

4. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to see if the gender pay gap affected the vote in Scotland because most people voted to remain in the EU regardless of gender or income.
5. The tripartite committee led by the European Commission, with the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.
6. A figure calculated by the Open Europe think tank, see Open Europe (2016) Top 100 EU Rules cost Britain £33.3bn, https://openeurope.org.uk/intelligence/britain-and-the-eu/top-100-eu-rules-cost-britain-33-3bn/ [Accessed 08/01/18].
7. Including at a national level: Britain in Europe, Sixteen Million Rising, Vote for Europe and Want2Stay; and at the local level: Aberdeen for Europe, EU In Brum, Hants4EU, The Berkshire 48%, Glostays and Wessex for Europe (see Harris, 2017).

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Notes on contributor

Julie MacLeavy is a Reader in the School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol. Her research interests lie in the field of economic geography, particularly in debates around work, welfare and neoliberal policy reform in contexts of austerity.

ORCID

Julie MacLeavy http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8158-0665

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