# 'Maybe we have left *them* behind': Brexit, ambivalence and contradiction

Working paper
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## Abstract

Much social scientific, media and political analysis of the UK referendum on EU membership identified the push for Brexit as coming from either 'left behind' places, or from people 'left behind' by, for example, austerity policies, the uneven effects of globalisation, the speed of social change, or neoliberal economics. The notion of 'left behind' congealed and became a mantra of the subsequent Conservative government who promised in their election manifesto to 'level up' and to speak for and on behalf of the 'left behind'. Many designated as such, refused the appellation. This paper unpacks the concept of 'left behind', showing how it works and travels, and indicating why it might have traction in public discourse. What does the notion of 'left behind' achieve, and for whom?

**Key words**
Brexit, left-behind, austerity, ambivalence, contradiction, trouble, social anthropology

## Introduction

In a book published in 1996 and co-authored with Joseba Zulaika, William A. Douglass wrote, counter to the currents of the time, about the proliferation of the discourse on terror and terrorism (Zulaika & Douglass, 1996). By the mid 1980s, they write, terrorism had been extended to acts of violence that had previously been labelled as murder, assassination, kidnapping, or bombing. It became common sense to both know and fear it. Writing of the United States, Douglass asserts that by the mid 1980s the circularity and proliferation of media and academic account of terrorism and the visibility, growth and growing cost of the US government's counter terrorism activities, made a view from the outside difficult. 'Terrorism has been 'naturalised' into a constant risk that is omnipresent out there, a sort of chaotic principle, always ready to strike and create havoc, and against which society must marshal all its resources in an unending struggle' (1996, p. 238). Here we see the reality-

making power of the discourse of 'terrorism' and how terrorism became a functional reality of American politics (and this five years prior to the 9/11 attacks).

Here I focus on 'the left behind': a concept that was constantly deployed and mobilised in Brexit discourse. Compared to the power, reach and fall-out of the concept of terrorism it may seem small and inconsequential, relevant only to the UK and its current inward-looking and self-referential preoccupations. However, by paying attention to it, I take inspiration from Douglass and interrogate its self-evident and common-sensical purchase.[1]

**'Left behind' - people and places**

On July 24th, 2019, The British Prime Minister, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson stood outside 10 Downing Street, in London and said:

> And I'll tell you something else about my job. It is to be Prime Minister of the whole United Kingdom and that means uniting our country, answering at last the plea of the forgotten people and the left-behind towns by physically and literally renewing the ties that bind us together.

This, in the same month, and just after, the publication of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the UK in Changing Europe report on what low-income voters in nine 'deprived' areas in the UK wanted post-Brexit. The report drew on data collected by Com Res (a research consultancy specialising in 'Corporate Reputation, Public Policy and Communications') in a series of eighteen 'deliberative workshops'. The stated aim of the report was to 'contribute to a conversation about how to deliver a country in which no one or place is left behind' (Bevington et al. 2019, p.92)  It pointed to how residents of cities and towns in the North, Midlands and Wales felt particularly 'left behind' by the South and London and reminded the reader that the Leave campaign three years earlier had 'encouraged those who had long been forgotten about and ignored to "take back control"'. The report concluded, that 'three years on there are still millions of people in poverty in the UK and many still feel ignored and *left behind'* (2019, p. 8, emphasis mine).

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[1] This paper is a version of the Distinguished Douglass Lecture, delivered November 2019 in Vancouver. It draws on an interdisciplinary, collaborative and experimental research project, funded by the ESRC, which aimed to investigate how Brexit was playing out in four urban localities in England.

The report, published just in time to inform the advisors and speech writers of the then new Prime Minister, makes direct links between the poor, the left behind and the vote to leave the EU. It identified two main categories of 'left behind':

1. areas of the country 'overshadowed' by large neighbouring cities where residents feel 'left behind, abandoned and unhappy' (2019, p. 16)
2. older people, in general, who are feeling left behind by the speed of social change.

Although it was a staple in the campaigning promises of the 2019 General Election from Conservatives, it was, in fact, deployed across the political spectrum. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Left Behind Neighbourhoods, launched in July 2020, also pinned its mast to the idiom of 'the left behind' in its aims to 'improve social and economic outcomes for residents in communities that suffer from a combination of economic deprivation, poor connectivity, low levels of community engagement and a lack of community spaces and places'.[2] The APPG also drew heavily on left behind's sister concept 'levelling up', identifying two hundred and twenty five 'left behind' neighbourhoods from which to establish what it calls the 'baseline outlook' for levelling up.

This concept of 'left behind' was constantly deployed in Brexit discourse. It bears further scrutiny. By paying attention to it here, my aim is to interrogate its self-evident and common-sensical purchase, while keeping in mind that it may have strategic and political value.

The origins of the term in the context of Brexit can be traced to political theorists Robert Ford and Mathew Goodwin who coined it in a 2014 publication analysing the rising popularity of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). They identified 'left behind voters' as:

> older, working-class, white ... citizens with few qualifications, who live on low incomes and lack the skills that are required to adapt and prosper amid the modern, post-industrial economy (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, p. 277).

I will return to the vexed notion of 'the white working-class', but for now want to stick with the concept of 'the left behind'. The work of Ford and Goodwin has been criticised for its

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[2] https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/who-we-are/

homogenising tendencies, its lack of attention to gender and for ignoring the relatively well-off UKIP voter, not to mention many of the party's leaders, backers and funders, who do not exhibit characteristics they attribute to 'the typical' UKIP voter. Despite, or perhaps because of, its flaws, this work has been highly influential and launched both authors (particularly Goodwin) as prominent public intellectuals, and the notion of 'the left behind' has stood the test of time. Used to refer to both place and person, numerous analyses have outlined the conditions from which 'the left behind' emerged and then the role it played in swinging the Brexit vote.

The decade of austerity politics and policies in the UK, implemented after the 2010 election by George Osborne, the then Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, undoubtedly had a more deleterious impact on poorer residents of the UK than on wealthier residents, and on some places more than others. The swingeing cuts in benefits and services in the name of austerity hit the poor, including those in work, the hardest. But for many of these people, austerity politics of the second decade of the 2000s only added to previous injury. The 1980s had already seen the closure of manufacturing industries (without alternative investment), and the erosion of worker's rights, collective action and political representation. Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever argue that it is 'the transformations of the 1980s' (which included the onset of neoliberalism, the delegitimising of socialist politics and the breakup of collective social movements, more than the recent era of austerity) 'that bear heaviest on our present moment' (and see Hozić & True, 2017; Virdee & McGeever, 2017, p. 1810).

Political economists Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig point to the 'Chinese import shock' of the 1990s that exposed some parts of the country more than others to competition from cheaper imported goods. They argue that the Leave vote reflected a dissatisfaction with the worsening economic conditions such 'communities' (their term) had been experiencing over time (Colantone & Stanig, 2018, p. 17).[3] But we still need to account for the fact that in those same 'communities' many residents voted to remain in the EU and many residents in wealthier areas of the country voted to leave.

Much of the social scientific analysis of Brexit started with the premise that it is the Leave vote, and the people who still wish to leave the EU, that requires explanation. As Katharine

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[3] https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/11/23/globalisation-and-brexit-areas-that-voted-to-leave-were-most-affected-by-the-chinese-import-shock/

Tyler put it, there has been a media, political and academic fascination with Leavers as the 'new exotica' (pers. comm.). Other commentators argue that too many studies of Brexit have been inflected by a 'methodological whiteness' (Benson & Lewis, 2019; Bhambra, 2017). And that the overweening focus on a rational 'indigenous, white working-class' (who were the 'real' or true victims of the aforementioned political and economic crises and who consequently voted to leave the EU) glossed over the racialised workings of contemporary capitalism and screened out the experiences of Black and Brown Britons (Benson & Lewis, 2019; Virdee & McGeever, 2018). The point to make here is that many analyses have posited causal and linear explanations for troubling courses of actions, and in so doing have screened out the incoherence and contradictions inherent in Brexit. The narratives and experiences that we were privy to in our research project were, for the most part, messy and multi-faceted and riven by contradiction and ambivalence: to the extent, I would argue, that no one analytical explanation, especially one with a linear causal narrative, will suffice.

If we trace the swerve in British political economy back to the neoliberal turn that began to undo the Keynsian welfare state and which was steered by the government of Margaret Thatcher, then we should remember that the economic logic of Thatcherism - with its hallmarks of deregulation, privatisation and free-market fundamentalism - had legs, and it continued to run through the successive project of New Labour to the extent that Margaret Thatcher was able claim Prime Minister Tony Blair as her greatest achievement (Telford & Wistow, 2019; Winlow et al., 2015). This has led Gillian Evans, amongst others, to argue that the 'white working classes' knew themselves to have been politically abandoned and this fuelled their grievances and prompted a turn to populist parties, including the BNP (Evans, 2012, 2017). One danger with this argument is that the 'working classes' are both homogenised and racialised (whitened) and, in the process, the reality of a multi-ethnic polity is displaced - yet again (and see Benson, 2019).

Such a dominant 'left behind' narrative did not, however, go unchallenged. Social geographer Danny Dorling, amongst others, questioned the easy narrative of the less well-off delivering Brexit. The result of the referendum he writes was due more to 'Comfortable Britain' than 'Left Behind Britain'. In his calculation, 52% of people who voted to Leave the EU lived in the southern half of England, and 'of all those who voted for Leave, 59% were middle class'. His argument is short on ethnographic detail, and as it stands leaves open the question of who gets to be designated 'middle-class' and by whom. Nonetheless, Dorling is surely correct in

saying that Brexit was a very English affair if, as he says, 87% per cent of Leave votes were cast in England. This begs the question of what was the problem in England that Brexit was the answer to? For Dorling, the Brexit vote mobilised a particular vision of Englishness (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019). For Virdee and McGeever (2017), it is an Englishness that sits in a 'deep-rooted nostalgia for the British Imperial project', and which articulates 'a new politics of resentment underscored by structural decline and class decomposition' (Benson, 2019; Virdee & McGeever, 2017, p. 1809). There is more to be said about the expression of a post-colonial malaise that Brexit gave voice to, and about the discursive contours these analysts have astutely identified. There is also more to be said about the heady mix of the post-industrial and the post-colonial (both expressed in idioms of loss and mourning) (and see Cochrane, 2020). But for present purposes, I note only that our research also revealed, amongst some of our interlocutors, a mourning for a Britain that was imperial, powerful on the world stage, and 'in control'. Sentiments that were deployed in the party-political tropes of the Conservatives in the UK, amplified in the British 'mainstream' media and elaborated upon along social media channels. For our interlocutors, this mourning was expressed in idioms of loss that could indeed be described as nostalgic, but I would argue not only: it was, and is, a mourning filled with grievance, in some cases with envy, and in many with hostility.

More left out, then, than left behind - and also let down. Insa Koch (2018) describes the sense of abandonment expressed by residents of 'Park End', a housing estate in the south of England. Her interlocutors feel betrayed, knowing that their 'own efforts to be 'decent' and 'good' against the odds remain unreciprocated by the authorities' (Koch, 2018, p. 204). For Park Enders, whatever effort you make, it is never good enough. In the referendum, Koch writes, people 'personalised politics inserting everyday moralities into the electoral processes by pouring their aspirations, hopes and frustrations into their respective votes' (2018, p. 190). This is an active, enthusiastic and angry voting public, about whom the grammar of 'left behind' seems inadequate.

Whichever origin story we wish to pursue, I think it fair to say that commentators who are wedded to the concept of 'left behind' in the context of Brexit used it to explain why people voted to leave the EU in June 2016. A powerful and dominant narrative after the referendum was that 'Left Behind Britain' had revolted - that the vote was an act of resistance by those who had not benefitted from globalisation, had suffered most from the policies of austerity, and who just couldn't keep up. The spatial imaginaries that juxtaposed the results of the

referendum with 'Left Behind Britain' were repeated over again and demarcated post-industrial towns and cities that had suffered, and not recovered, from the loss of manufacturing jobs, and a London, the South East of England and a few financial centres in larger cities that were flourishing. Such dominant images and narratives occluded massive differences within each of these 'camps'. A preoccupation with why people voted to leave the EU, also failed to interrogate why residents of England, positioned similarly in terms of their social and economic geographies, voted to remain (let alone, why many did not vote or could not vote). As historian Susan Pederson wrote soon after the referendum and with some degree of surprise, 'for all its flaws, the European project won the support of 48 per cent of the population of its most historically ambivalent and carping member' (Pedersen, 2016).[4] And that was, as political sociologist Adrian Favell put it, 'despite reducing the question of membership of international governance structures to a clapometer election' (pers. comm.).

The fact that the Keynsian-Fordist project, acting here as the benchmark for better times, was short-lived, highly contested and unequally dispersed, has not prevented it from looming large in the imagination of a lost, but better, more stable and more secure economic past. Despite its fragility, contested nature and unequal distribution, it has left profound traces and hauntings, and has what Andrea Muehlbach and Nitzan Shoshan (2012) call a 'peculiar afterlife'. Following Lauren Berlant, they use the term 'post-Fordist affect' to think through the 'affective attachments' it galvanises in the present (Berlant, 2007), identifying a sharp nostalgia that haunts the present, which is a longing as much for 'aspirational forms' as for actually achieved social and economic realities. In their words:

> Across the globe, people are mourning an era that carved its indelible marks upon the affective topographies of entire populations. For some, these marks consisted of the promise of relative economic security and well-being, plausible middle-class aspirations, and a sense of linear biographical legibility; for others, it was personal and political futurities that allowed for an orientation toward safety and affluence ... For others still, it entailed the figure of a strong state, robust unionism, or the normative order of heterosexual patriarchy (Muehlebach & Shoshan, 2012, p. 317).

These words introduce a collection of essays that track a post-Fordist affect beyond Northern Europe and North America, to South Africa and Latin America where it appears in the form

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[4] Note that the 48 per cent is of 72.2 per cent of registered voters.

of 'attachments to frustrated desires, unfulfilled promises, and interrupted aspiration' (Muehlbach & Shoshan 2012: 326) - similar, I want to argue, to the frustrations, stutterings and mournings that were expressed through the prism of Brexit by residents in the neighbourhoods in England in which we were working.[5]

But let me backtrack for a minute and go back to the word 'Brexit' itself. Campaigners lobbied hard, and it turns out nefariously, for Britain to leave the EU and they continue, with renewed enthusiasm, to set the terms of the debate. Their mantra 'take back control' resonated with various English publics battered by more than a decade of austerity and also, significantly, with Eurosceptic elites looking to shed the shackles of the EU and woo the Anglosphere. In the words of Nigel Farage in an interview for Fox Business News in December 2018:

> by being outside the European Union, by being outside very backward laws, whether it's on the environment, whether it's on employment, we could become competitive. We could undercut Europe, we could become cheaper.[6]

From a feminist, critical political-economy perspective, Aida Hozić and Jaqui True remind us that 'Brexit is a product of gendered intra-elite conflict that has been simmering in Britain for decades' (Hozić & True, 2017). Yet, we are all now, whatever persuasion, caught in the 'dream language' of the lobbyists who coined the portmanteau of British and Exit to name and frame the idea of Britain leaving the EU (Sykes, 2018). I would urge us to not also be caught in the pseudo-empathetic language of the 'left behind'. The JRF/UK in a Changing Europe report I cited earlier contains many quotations from research participants: none use the term. Nor, for the most part, do the people we were speaking to in four electoral wards on the edges of three English cities. Yet while the idea that the 'left behind' swung the vote for Brexit has been discredited, and it is not a phrase that people 'on the ground' are using of either themselves or their neighbourhoods, it continues to gain traction in academic, media and political discourse. Why?

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[5] It should be noted that while a 'post-Fordist affect' might be felt 'across the globe', it is not felt in every part of the globe and, where it is, it is more than likely that loss and dispossession will be inflected and experienced differently.

[6] https://video.foxbusiness.com/v/5979263367001/#sp=show-clips.

**Strategic essentialising**

Let me start with our own project. We were four social anthropologists, a geographer and a sociologist on a short, experimental project, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which we called 'Learning from 'Left Behind' Places: Everyday Hopes and Fears for the Future After Brexit in England'. We shamelessly borrowed the language of the call and deployed one of its key concepts, albeit signalling our squeamishness, and disagreement amongst ourselves, about its purchase, by putting the idiom 'left behind' in scare quotes. I think it fair to say that we used it strategically, instrumentally even, with the aim of speaking to the call and securing support.

While we are finding that residents of places that might, in common parlance, be considered 'left behind' resent and reject it as a label (to which I return below), they may also find it productive (and perhaps increasingly so) for making claims on the state. The concept of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1993; Spivak & Harasym, 1990) and what we know anthropologically about its processes, politics and pitfalls (Berk, 2020; Hale, 2006; Sylvain, 2014) may be useful here. I am reminded also of ethnographic research that shows how citizens as victims make claims for both recognition and recompense (Petryna, 2002; Petryna & Follis, 2015).

As noted above, the notion of 'the white working class' had already gained legs prior to the referendum. Used originally in social scientific research as a descriptive and analytical category, it was taken up by some working-class people themselves as an identity marker and mobilised to make claims on the state. It was further disseminated and promoted by UKIP (and not only UKIP) to stoke a sense of grievance and to woo the disaffected voter (Ware, 2008). A dominant and powerful narrative emerged that 'the principal losers from globalization, and particularly migration, were a social category referred to as the "white working class"' (Virdee & McGeever, 2018, p. 1814). The message that 'the white working class' had suffered most from the effects of globalisation effectively screened out - invisibilised - black and ethnic minority working-class residents of the UK. By making the working-class white they could also be associated with racism and could be made separate from Black and Asian Britons. In the lead up to the referendum, the 'white working class' was explicitly juxtaposed with the 'immigrant' which significantly privileged one stratum of Britain's working class over any other on the grounds of race and citizenship. This whitening of the working classes fuelled the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Leave.EU campaign and was

sewn into the seams of the 2017 and 2019 general election campaigns. Writing of the 'wilful whitening of class identities [is] for racist ends', Gargi Battacharyya asks how is it 'that feeling poor or feeling angry or feeling unheard can be funnelled into feeling white' (Bhattacharyya, 2017: 20).

It bears repeating that the transnational links between the campaign to elect Donald Trump as 45th president of the United States and one of the campaigns in the UK to leave the EU have been well documented. We know, for example, that Raheem Khassam advisor to Nigel Farage leader of Leave.EU campaign was the same person head-hunted by Steve Bannon to head up the London office of Breitbart. The advice that Kassam and Bannon gave both the Leave.EU and Trump campaigns was to focus on Muslim migration and the alleged threat of radical Islam (Thorleiffson in Bangstad et al., 2019).

Many of the people talking to us in 2019 in four electoral wards - Wallsend, Harpurhey, Gorse Hill and Dagenham - in three English cities - Newcastle, Manchester and London - spoke about 'immigration' in their ruminations on Brexit. They reflect on it being a factor in people's Brexit positions, although many said not their own. Many introductions to the theme of immigration start with caveat: 'Don't get me wrong but …'.  While this epigraph begs further attention, suffice to say here that 'immigration', like Brexit, acts as conduit for what people want to say about their current experiences of living in England. 'Immigration', like Brexit, is a signifier filled with hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations. Both are narrated in stories freighted with everyday morality, contradiction and ambivalence - which is not to say that such narratives are never racist, but that they are always more than that. It is used to refer to different categories of person, often acting to create racialised 'others': it is used willy-nilly to refer to British Black and Asian compatriots;  to refugees and asylum seekers; to White citizens of so called EU8 and EU2 countries, who were free to move to, and work in, the UK from 2004 onwards; to British South Asian Muslims who were the main target of Brexit-related hate crimes (Favell, 2021). It is a multivalent term that can be both vehicle for and manifestation of racism, and much more.

**Becoming left behind**

Dagenham is on the eastern edge of London.  It grew up with the car industry: now gone. And is the one London borough where the majority of residents who voted in the referendum, voted to Leave the EU.  In response to my question 'Is Dagenham left behind?', Mary says: 'It

is very difficult. The original community would have been left behind, but the council want to bring in a new community'. Earlier she had told me:

> certain people in the council are trying to bring in people to make it kind of like more gentrified so it is alienating the local population … and the people they are trying to attract in now with their *affordable* flats at £450, 000 are not ordinary people that are here now. Their sons and daughters can't buy houses here.

This is taken from one of four long, meandering conversations I recorded with staff and volunteers at a community centre and local history museum in Dagenham on the edge of the Becontree estate. The Becontree estate is said to have been the largest public housing development in the world when it was built between 1921-1935. Spread over 4 square miles, it comprises 27,000 dwellings.

The first time I visited the centre, volunteers, mostly local residents, were making 'poo'. It turned out the poo was for the upcoming weekend of Caveman Capers where visiting children would be invited to play at being archaeologists of pre-historical diets in a 'poo detective workshop'. The weekend before there had been a teddy bear's picnic and one woman described the glee on the children's faces as a teddy bear whizzed towards them at high speed on a zip wire. The volunteers are enthusiastic about the projects they get involved in and of the service that the centre provides, especially they say to families with young children who do not have much: even more important in the school holidays.

School holidays come up frequently in our conversations about Brexit in these four English electoral wards. For example, in Harpurhey in north Manchester, women who run the canteen in the youth zone take it upon themselves, during the school holidays, to feed the younger siblings of the teenagers who attend the centre. They tell us that although they are not supposed to, if they don't then the younger children, who get free school meals during term time, would not eat properly in the school holidays. They cannot bear the thought that only some and not all the children of one family would have 'a decent meal'.[7]

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[7] As I edit this article in January 2021 at another height of the pandemic, this observation seems to me even more poignant than I found it then. It precedes, and perhaps portends, the ineptitude of the UK government in its recent response to the campaign for free school meals during the school holidays spearheaded by the footballer Marcus Rashford.

Back to Dagenham and later in our conversation:

Susan: You know, the tag line of the borough is *No one left behind* [pause] it really means, 'None of the *right* people left behind' (her emphasis)

Julie: This is the borough of social cleansing

Mary: Councillor X, he actually used that term [social cleansing]. He wants to bring in the *right* people - people who work, pay their taxes and pay their council tax

Susan: but ... you don't add much to your community because if you are working up in town they won't be going out in Dagenham will they? They will be going out where they work _

Mary: _they are trying to bring in now more cultural industries like a film studio and things like that - all the arty sort of stuff. Well, with all due respect to our locals, that is hardly ... it is not up their street

Susan: Where are your social parts? When Becontree estate was built, they encouraged pubs to have function rooms which is why the Roundhouse became so famous. They realised that community hubs and community centres were really important. But in all these new builds - they are not creating community hubs.

Later in the conversation, one of the women, goes on to make a comparison between Dagenham and Hornchurch which by contrast is 'very much a social centre'. She explains: 'There are pubs, there are restaurants, there are clubs all centred on the high street - it is such a social centre - with a still nice high street that is a mix of independent and chain shops'. For her, the changes on Dagenham's high street are embodied in the emergence of 'Asian' and 'Polish' shop fronts that provide foods and services to residents other than her.
These women complicate any simple causal narrative that posits left behind places as homogeneous and fixed. Mary suggests that without the council interventions the 'original community' might have been considered 'left behind', but that it is the interventions themselves that are creating the 'left behind' through exclusion and hierarchy - in this case, by elevating certain categories of residents as more desirable than others. They point to the

emergence of residents left out of policies and practices that are meant to ensure, in the motto of the council, 'no one left behind'. New, relatively wealthy residents, in new build expensive flats, with a proposed film studio and art gallery, hardly fit the profile of the left behind place: so, no, they say, Dagenham as a place is not left behind. However, they make clear that in its becomings, in its future potentialities, existing residents will be left out: sidelined and demoted (and see Mckenzie, 2017).

## Behind the times

In Brexit parlance, it can be regions, communities, towns, or places that are 'left behind' and, as a descriptor, it is also attached to voters, the white working class, the elderly, or the poor. It is also associated with 'the traditional', with place-based roots and immobility, and consequently and more often than not with being stuck. This sense that mobility is a virtue is a strong trope of the contemporary. It makes the way in which its value is denied to certain categories of person, refugees or 'immigrants' for example, all the more striking. Both people *or* places, then, are said to be 'left behind' and left behind by more lively and vital metropolitan centres; or by globalisation; or digitalisation; or the speed of change; or by out-of-touch and distant elites. The idiom connotes people who cannot keep up - they lag behind: laggards perhaps? And it is firmed up in relation to another imagined community 'the liberal metropolitan elite'. Listen, for example, to Mathew Goodwin and Oliver Heath:

> Whereas political and media elites broadly shared values that translated into support for social liberalism, multiculturalism and EU membership, left behind working-class voters and older social conservatives were united by an altogether different set of values that translated into support for a more authoritarian and nativist response (Goodwin & Heath, 2016, p. 325).

I read this as a work of distillation and purification that firms up a seemingly unassailable boundary between two homogenous categories of person.

Historian Maria Todorova writes of backwardness. Her focus is on Eastern European nation building, the study of which she argues is subjected to the same evolutionary paradigm as industrialisation, modernisation and enlightenment (Todorova, 2005). The dominant assumption, she points out, is that nation building in eastern Europe came later than in the west. Conventional wisdom has it that ideas like the 'Enlightenment, national self-determination, individual liberties, and so on were and are organic to the west, whereas in the

east they are transplanted on alien soil' (Todorova 2005: 154). This means it suffers, she writes, from a chronic allochronism: the 'non-western is always living in another time', even when [they are] contemporaneous. She borrows the evocative phrase 'a simultaneity of the non-contemporaneous' which, she notes, 'produces a kind of moral complacency, a temporal feeling of superiority' (Todorova 2005: 164). I think this helpful in thinking through the way in which the notion of left behind is deployed in current Brexit discourse. The left behind are denied co-evalness: living not only in another place, but also in another time. Behind the times, perhaps.

Many social commentators who, post-referendum, put the 'left behind' in the driving seat of Brexit, were in effect blaming them. The grammar of 'left behind' glossed over accusation, by conveying understanding - empathy even.  But the people to whom they refer remain decidedly unimpressed. They are calling out the pseudo-sympathy and refusing to be patronised.

A group of local residents in Gorse Hill, Manchester have taken it upon themselves to tidy up and beautify the neighbourhood by planting on waste ground and painting ugly bollards and rusting shop shutters. One of their meetings took place on the same day in March 2019 that Prime Minister Theresa May announced that her government had pledged £1.6 billion to a 'Stronger Towns Fund'. It was reported in some media as a bribe to 'left behind towns' in England - predominantly Brexit voting and Labour supporting - and more specifically a bribe to their MPs in the leadup to a crucial Brexit vote in parliament. Critics also derided the amount of money offered as tokenistic and, spread over seven years, a 'drop in the ocean' in comparison to the draconian cuts that had been imposed on local authorities since 2013.[8]

The announcement was treated with scorn by these Gorse Hillians.

 'It is like an abusive relationship', Paula told us, 'they smack you around and then they buy you flowers'.

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[8] The TUC estimated that central government's money to local councils had been almost halved since 2013
https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/stronger-towns-fund-government-offer-wont-help-held-back-towns

Later in the conversation we ask the group whether Gorse Hill is left behind. They are scathing: 'Maybe we have left *them* behind' June retorts, and others agree.

For her, and many other people to whom we have put the question, the label is offensive and says more about the namer than the named. 'It is somebody saying something about people, without asking them', explained another woman:  it is about power, she went on, from people who claim to speak *for* them.

Turning the tables - 'we have left *them* behind' - brings people's efforts to make things work upfront. It says, here and now, they - the government, media pundits, academics, policy makers and so on - have been left behind: it is they that are stuck, out of touch, failing to keep up with what is happening on the ground. They who lag behind:  laggards perhaps?

**Keeping things going**

We only began to gauge the extent of what is being done by residents on the edges of three major cities in England to keep things going. Whether it is clearing rubbish and making the immediate physical environment attractive; or collecting for and organising food banks; or volunteering in community and youth centres that provide respite for young people, or company for the elderly, and food for both. In the four electoral wards in which we were working, in North Tyneside, Manchester and East London the efforts of a small number of residents who seem to be picking up the pieces of a shattered welfare state are striking.  And this has been writ large in the subsequent crisis of Covid 19.

Yet, there is a danger in celebrating this as a success story.  Acknowledging and honouring the fortitude and creativity, not to mention the massive amount of unpaid work, that residents are putting into their neighbourhoods on behalf of their neighbours, runs the risk of deflecting attention from wilful disinvestment - from specific and calculated national and local government policies. Naomi Klein (Klein, 2014) quotes the New York civil rights lawyer Tracy Washington:

> Stop calling me resilient. Because every time you say, 'Oh, they're resilient,' you can do something else to me (cited in Petryna & Follis, 2015, p. 410).

Muehlbach's rendering of the moral neoliberal may provide one way of working with the ambivalence generated by the inordinate amount of unpaid work and effort put into local neighbourhoods by their residents. Providing us with one way, perhaps, of staying with the trouble, rather than avoiding it. She draws on ethnographic research in the northern Italian city of Milan - Italy's financial and industrial capital - to chart the emergence of citizens as 'heartfelt subjects at a moment that so many scholars argue is characterized by a spirit of immorality and heartlessness' (2012: 11). The figure of 'the volunteer', she argues, rose meteorically in Italy in the first decade of the 21st century to become a central category in Italian public life. For Muehlbach, their affective, generous and compassionate labour is about much more than the neoliberal state's capacity to extract cheap labour:

> The ethical labor of citizens is thus much more than merely cheap. It has, precisely because it is unwaged, become the pathos-laden vehicle through which collective transcendence and meaning and value get conjured (Muehlebach, 2012, p. 13).

Muehlbach argues that voluntary work in Italy is animated by Catholicism, but not only. 'Leftist volunteers', she writes, distance themselves from catholic versions of 'charity', but nonetheless celebrate the participatory, collective and local democratic action that counters state neglect. The 'leftist volunteers' with whom she worked knowingly critique the amorality of neoliberal reform, and at the same time consider voluntarism to be an expression of solidarity: 'a form of radical gift giving that allowed for a politics of insubordination vis-à-vis the market' (2012, p. 14).

The way in which the moral neoliberal - the ethical, compassionate and gift-giving subject - both negates and is integral to market neoliberalism speaks to our current project in England. However, I think it necessary to make finer distinctions between what it means to 'volunteer' and the compulsion for individual and collective acts of generosity and kindness because the alternative is unbearable. I think we are also seeing the kind of quotidian and unspoken acts of support that Clara Han, for example, describes in her ethnography of a poor barrio in urban Santiago, Chile, where a neighbour feeds the hungry child of a mother who is unable to directly ask for help (Han, 2012). Han describes how concealed acts of kindness acknowledge critical moments of need without explicitly naming them. And 'how that kindness must be concealed to protect a living-with-dignity' (2012, p. 86).

In critiquing the notion of 'left behind', my aim is not to minimise the extent to which the neighbourhoods in which we are working have been at the sharp end of social and economic transformations since the 1980s, at a time when the Chancellor Geoffrey Howe could advise Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to abandon Liverpool, for example, and initiate a process of 'managed decline'. Indeed we only just scratched the surface of the depth of hardship that many residents of these places are experiencing: whether it is the closure of council housing lists in Dagenham entailing the bussing of people to available accommodation in the north of England; or the precarity of household income since first the coal and then the ship industry moved out of Wallsend; or the roll out of the new and harsh PIP (Personal Independence Payment) assessments in Harpurhey; or the rationing of rubbish collection and street cleaning in Gorse Hill; or the bedroom tax in all four places. Many people who are talking to us feel punished, and many considered that things could not get any worse, so leaving the EU was worth a punt.

So what of the role of the anthropologist in the analysis of the fraught political moment in which one is implicated. If we jump too fast to judgement or advocacy we run the risk of bypassing the friction and ambivalence at the heart of this social conflict. Laura Bear recently quoted Raymond Firth as saying that anthropology *should* be an 'uncomfortable science'. She reads Firth as arguing that anthropologists need to perform a balancing act between 'attachment in relation to facts, and attachment to humanist ethics' (Bear, 2017, p. 144). To get, that is, a balance between analytical distance and political engagement. I am not convinced that balance is possible.

Nitzan Shoshan in a compelling ethnography of far-right extremists in Germany identifies the tension between distance and proximity in his fieldwork that exceeded, he says, the negotiation of analytical detachment and personal familiarity common to many ethnographic studies (Shoshan, 2016). The tension he argues cannot be resolved. I have recently had reason to cite anthropologist Charles Stafford, who has addressed what he sees as a tendency to judge inherent in anthropology 'at home' (Stafford, 2018; Edwards 2023; and see Edwards, 2000). Anthropologists are more likely, he suggests, to be more critical of 'their own'- to forgive less - which raises, for him, a broader question of what anthropologists find forgivable and why. As I argued there, forgiveness is not, in my view, an apt response to unpalatable views or distasteful practices in the field, wherever located. It is not something that subjects of anthropological research necessarily require or demand from the

anthropologist, nor is it self-evidently in the anthropologist's gift to extend. Marcus Banks and Andre Gingrich in an early volume tracking the rise of far right in Europe, call for us to ditch sympathy and cultivate empathy (Gingrich & Banks, 2006).  While John Foster an early career scholar and research associate on this project insists on compassion (pers. comm.).  It is hard to knock empathy or compassion as an anthropologist, and of course we would like to think that all anthropologists have these qualities (despite occasional evidence to the contrary). Forgiveness, empathy, compassion – it is beginning to sound like the job spec for a Christian cleric. However much we laud them as necessary preconditions for sensitive fieldwork, they are not sufficient to render the social world we aim to understand intelligible. Fieldwork, it is often said, requires a certain distancing. But rather than distance, I vote we get right in the thick of it: stay, as Donna Haraway would have it, with the trouble (Haraway, 2016); engage the ambivalence, both our informants and our own; and dwell in, and on, the interstices.

It seemed difficult to say anything coherent about Brexit.  It was everywhere and nowhere, not only slippery and shifting on the broad political stage, but also contradictory and perverse at any micro-level. This paper made a start at unpacking one of the dense and multivalent idioms in circulation in the febrile discussions of Brexit and its consequences. It takes seriously Carol Greenhouse's call for anthropology to understand the diversity of people's practical experiences of democracy (or lack of it) in their own lives (Holbraad et al., 2019). It attempts to 'look through' Brexit and to recognise, like Greenhouse does for current US political cleavages, that a relativism which frames ethnography with lines of leave and remain 'is unsustainable as it can only totalise and essentialize social life in partisan political terms' (Greenhouse, 2019, p. 88). Staying with the trouble means dwelling on both the wise and troublesome sentiments of those whose views we solicit: not swerving away, or making excuses, or sliding over the unpalatable.

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