



Maronitis, K. (2021). The present is a foreign country: Brexit and the performance of victimhood. *British Politics*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-020-00151-7>

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## **The Present is a Foreign Country: Brexit and the Performance of Victimhood**

### **Abstract**

This article examines the campaign of the Brexit Party via the conceptual frameworks of cultural performance and the politics of victimhood. The Brexit Party depicts the post-industrial working class communities as forgotten and betrayed and attacks the Labour Party for its stance on Brexit. While current research on national populism focuses on demographic and cultural changes and highlights a prevailing distrust of the political establishment there is little as to how victimhood is performed by the agents of national populism. By deploying Jeffrey Alexander's conceptualisation of cultural performance, the article identifies the current status of victimhood and its political communication in the Brexit debate. As a result, the post-industrial working class becomes the victim of failed policies and the authentic voice of a country unable to assert its dominance in the world. The social actors in the Brexit Party's campaign are being motivated by and towards concerns the meanings of which are defined by signifiers of inequality and nostalgia. The article makes two arguments: the cultural performance of victimhood is a precondition for articulations of nationalism and belonging; the cultural performance of victimhood is integral for the communication of loss, democratic deficit and for presenting the working class as a racialised minority.

**Key words: victimhood; recognition; working class identity; performance; Brexit**

### **1. Introduction**

The 2019 European Parliament elections took place in a political and cultural environment dominated by sentiments of betrayal and suspicion. Since the 2016 referendum and the vote to leave the European Union a series of political events have not only contributed to the instability of the British political system but also to the re-alignment of previously established party-

political affiliations. From the Gina Miller court case against the UK government over its authority to implement Brexit without the approval of the parliament ((R (Miller) v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union) and the hung parliament of the 2017 General Elections (House of Commons Library, 2019) to the extension of Article 50 due to inability of the government and MPs to agree on the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement (Institute for Government, 2019) the Brexit debate has given birth to new political groupings and cultural alliances.

It comes as no surprise then, that the 2019 European Parliament Elections in the UK were staged as either a popular ratification or rejection of the 2016 referendum. Pro-Brexit parties such as UKIP and the newly established Brexit Party led by Nigel Farage campaigned under the banners of “betrayal”, “trust”, “honesty” and “integrity” (UKIP, 2019; The Brexit Party, 2019). On the other hand, individual MPs and parties advocating a second referendum based their campaign on the false promises made by the Leave campaign and on newly acquired information regarding the meaning of Brexit and its impact on society and economy. These campaign slogans build on and at the same time reinforce the existing perception that politics is not serving people well, especially those on low incomes. As the Joseph Rowntree report on low income voters and political attitudes (Ainsley and Sooden, 2019) shows, many people live in areas neglected by politicians of all ideological inclinations who are either incapable or unwilling to provide solutions to their problems.

The Brexit Party finished first in the European elections with 30.74 per cent of the vote followed by the most prominent Remain party the Liberal Democrats with 19.75 per cent of the vote. Labour, the official opposition party finished third with 13.72 per cent of the vote and the Greens finished fourth with 11.76 per cent of the vote. The Conservatives as the governing

party finished fifth with 8.84 per cent of the vote (European Parliament, 2019). According to the leader of the Brexit Party Nigel Farage, the European elections were not only about the EU but more importantly about the character of the country and its defunct two-party political system whose representatives defied the will of 17.4 million voters (The Brexit Party, 2019). To that end, the Brexit Party recruited and subsequently sent to the European Parliament a diverse cohort of MEPs comprised of business figures, NHS doctors, dedicated Leavers disillusioned with the inertia of the Conservatives over Brexit as well as former members of the Revolutionary Communist Party (Sharma, 2019).

Despite the fact that the proportional representation of the EU elections provided an opportunity for the Brexit Party to assert itself as a party capable of gaining power by posing a serious challenge to the traditional two-party dominance, the 2019 general elections necessitated a different campaign strategy. The UK's first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system and Boris Johnson's campaign slogan "Get Brexit Done" (Perigo, 2019) deprived the Brexit Party of its monopoly over proclamations of national sovereignty and muscular Euroscepticism. Subsequently, Nigel Farage and Richard Tice as the Brexit Party's leader and chairman respectively decided not to fill in candidates in the parliamentary seats won by the Conservatives in the 2017 elections but only to compete against Labour MPs in the North and in the Midlands. The goals of this electoral strategy were clear: maximise the chances of electing MPs dedicated to the cause of Brexit and present Labour as an elitist party unwilling to respond to the wishes and anxieties of traditional working class voters.

While there is a growing body of research that convincingly examines the rise of national populism and the success of parties like the Brexit Party as a direct result of distrust of politicians and the establishment, and of demographic and cultural changes by regulated and

unregulated immigration flows (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2019; Runciman, 2018; Gest, 2016 ) there is little as to how notions of victimhood, betrayal, the white working class and the left-behind are constructed and performed by the agents of contemporary national populism. This is not to suggest that these accounts are wrong but rather limited because they do not consider the performative qualities of victimhood as framed by the dynamic interplay between the binaries of elites and the people, working class and middle class, tradition and modernity, metropolitan and provincial, winners and losers. This article makes two different yet interconnected arguments. First, the cultural performance of victimhood by the Brexit Party is a precondition for contemporary articulations of nationalism and belonging. Second, the cultural performance of victimhood is an indispensable component for the political communication of loss, democratic deficit and for presenting the post-industrial working class as a racialised minority.

The article is organised as follows: the second section illustrates the empirical material of the article and highlights the theoretical and methodological merits of cultural sociology and performance via the work of Jeffrey Alexander. The third section focuses on the political and cultural meanings of victimhood and on the conditions, which have contributed to new forms of inequality and marginalisation. The fourth section deals with the performance of victimhood by the Brexit Party focusing on party political videos before and after the 2019 European elections. The fifth section provides an analysis of the cultural performance of victimhood by the Brexit Party informed by a cultural sociological theoretical framework.

## **2. Empirical Material and Methodology**

The article conspicuously paraphrases and mis-appropriates the first sentence of LP Hartley's classic novel *The Go-Between* – “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently

there". The introduction to the novel's Penguin Modern Classics edition by Douglas Brooks-Davies (2000: xi) notes that *The Go-Between* "is not only nostalgic, it is about nostalgia: about the recovery of lost memories where those memories are not only personal (and, it turns out, deeply painful) but collective and cultural". The proverbial status of LP Hartley's opening sentence has been one of the most popular platforms for understanding the cultural dynamics involved in individual and collective memories. Most notably, David Lowenthal's (1985) book *The Past is a Foreign Country* deals with the way European and American societies treat and understand the past. If the past is indeed a foreign country, then Lowenthal (1985) asserts that nostalgia has made it a prime tourist destination where the old provides a sense of comfort as well as of cultural superiority. This article redirects the focus from the past to the present and highlights the latter's political and cultural environment. If the present is a foreign country, the political campaigns of the Brexit Party have presented it as an unwelcoming destination for a specific segment of the population- namely the post-industrial working class located in Britain's former mining and industrial towns.

The empirical material of this article derives from the official political campaign of the Brexit Party in the run up to 2019 European Parliament elections; the "We Are Ready" campaign addressing the 2019 UK General Elections; and the Brexit Party 2019 General Election broadcast. In particular, the article analyses the election communication of the Brexit Party titled "Changing Politics for Good", the political advertising videos titled "Labour is the party of Dalston, not Doncaster", "The Labour Party used to represent the working class, Now they are the party of Remain", and the official Brexit Party general election broadcast. The selection of the 2019 EU Parliament and General Election campaign broadcasts that forms the backbone of this analysis is not the result of a deliberate sampling. All broadcasts are part of the Brexit Party's official campaign and are freely available on Twitter and YouTube, which was

considered a strength as it invites voters and academic experts to engage with the campaign on their own terms. The article focuses on the content of these broadcasts in the attempt to persuade the UK electorate to vote for the Brexit Party in the EU Parliament elections and not vote for Labour in the General Elections.

The article addresses but does not limit its scope to either an economic-centred analysis of victimhood as a direct result of social inequality or to an analysis of the Brexit Party's campaign as part of a considerable and deliberative political debate. To that effect, the article engages with a cultural sociological approach (Alexander, 2011; 2017) for the analysis of victimhood as a performative action taking place on public stages in which actors create and project performances of their life experiences, anxieties and motives tailored to audiences whose voice and will have become legitimate references in political conflicts and debates. Alexander's cultural sociological method is best defined when placed opposite to the more established sub-discipline of sociology of culture. In the latter, culture is examined as a by-product of hard data and specific variables such as demography, class and income. In other words, culture becomes at once a mere epiphenomenon of social structures and an instrument for the reproduction of social relations. On the other hand, cultural sociology as a specific methodological approach borrows from Dilthey's (1996) suggestion to look at the "inner meaning" of social structure and in turn commits to the establishment of culture as an autonomous analytical entity. In methodological terms, cultural sociology requires the "bracketing out" of wider non-symbolic relations. This "bracketing out" allows the reconstruction and close examination of the cultural text in question – that is the election campaign broadcasts of the Brexit Party. The article deconstructs the cultural performance of victimhood in terms of representations, narrative, actors and agency and then aims to produce generalised knowledge of victimhood, social class and inequality within the wider Brexit debate. Only after having established the campaign

broadcasts as the object of analysis, does it become possible to remove the brackets and examine the ways in which the cultural performance of victimhood intersects with other social forces and issues, namely income, ethnicity, residence and age. Ultimately, the deployment of cultural sociology as a method aspires to the provision of a different and also supplementary dimension to analyses of political campaigns as a means to political power. It is about how political campaigns attempt to culturally justify ideas, policies and movements, and how parties and their candidates symbolise the electorate in a discursive way.

### **3. The Politicisation of Victimhood**

The victim has become one of the most important figures in contemporary European and British politics. From the ongoing immigration and refugee crisis to the financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies, victimhood constitutes a powerful means for social groups demanding justice and recognition of their status as victims. Such demands occur throughout the world and western liberal democracies are not immune to them. Ethnic and racial discrimination, political repression and austerity policies with disproportionate effects on the population have contributed to a fragmented social landscape with different individuals and social groups claiming the status of the victim.

Following Horwitz's (2018) theoretical elaboration on the relationship between victimhood and politics we can identify two different but not necessarily unrelated forms of victimhood. First, there is the "national form of victimhood" that involves wars, conflicts as well as commemorations and rituals concerning the sacrifice of people for the good of the nation. Second, there is the "group form of victimhood" that involves groups of people shaped by specific cultural and political factors whose lives have been negatively affected by the actions and policies of institutions, corporations and governments. Even though most of these groups



are associated with minorities there are several examples where political and corporate elites have ignored, marginalised or inflicted harm on the majority of a nation, city or any other form of polity.

The UK is an ethnically diverse country in which traditional notions of race, nationality and class are increasingly contested. At the same time, the process of de-industrialising the British economy initiated by Margaret Thatcher's administration and the parallel growth of the service economy have contributed to the fragmentation of the working class and the sharp rise in insecure, precarious labour. Nevertheless, these social changes have neither been implemented in a standardised way across the UK nor have they had the same effect on the population's attitudes, well-being and voting preferences. Areas defined by the presence of universities and of growing young population with the appropriate skills appear to do well in this new globalised, service-oriented economy; other areas with an aging population previously employed in manufacturing, steel and coal industries are in constant decline. The economic and social discrepancies between these areas and their respective inhabitants is neatly summarised as the discrepancy between the winners and losers of the globalised economy. Across Europe, the losers of the post-industrial, globalised economy are increasingly associated with the rising popularity and electoral success of Eurosceptic, far right parties. (Maronitis, 2017). Similarly, in the UK the very same demographic with anxieties over immigration and sovereignty are the core supporters of the Brexit Party and of the vote to leave the EU (Pencheva and Maronitis, 2018).

The inability to agree the terms and conditions of Britain's departure from the EU and the unwillingness to implement the result of the referendum have contributed to a form of victimhood that adheres to the national and group forms of victimhood respectively. Within

this political framework the UK as a nation state is placed against the EU as a powerful federation and Leave voters constitute a virtuous majority whose will has systematically been ignored by political and corporate elites. A series of political theorists and analysts have attributed this Brexit related victimhood to the rise of technocratic politics and to the limitations of liberal democracy to represent and defend the anxieties and rights of people defined interchangeably as “white working class”, “traditional working class”, “traditional Labour voters”, “blue collar workers”, “peripheral”, “left behind” and “provincial”.

Eatwell and Goodwin’s (2019) account of the rising disparity between the governing class and the working class and the subsequent victimisation of the latter points to the rise and legitimisation of national populism. For the authors, national populism’s rise and legitimisation is socially and historically framed by “distrust” of politicians, “destruction” of national groups’ identity and culture due to mass immigration, “deprivation” as a result of unequal taxation and wealth distribution; and finally by the “de-alignment” of political affiliation, attachment and membership due to the inability of established parties to represent the anxieties and interests of the electorate.

In a similar fashion, Christophe Guilluy (2019) views the rise of populism through the prism of social inequality and geographical exclusion. Here, the argument is that the dominant rhetoric of “openness” and “peaceful inclusivity” does not only distort social reality but also creates new social and cultural dividing lines. In particular, Guilluy (ibid.) identifies two social groups in this reconfigured political and cultural environment. The first group consists of the “new moderns” capable of navigating their lives in the complex globalised network, willing to teach their fellow citizens to see and experience the world as they do. The second group consists of the “new ancients” incapable of navigating their lives in the complex globalised network

and marginalised by developments in economy and culture. Those two groups, according to Guilluy, encapsulate the current battle between the winners and losers of globalisation - between the upper and lower classes. These new dividing lines effectively position the upper class as the morally superior class. Any critique of the current political and economic system is seen as part of a growing populist movement sceptical or even phobic of hyper mobility, the introduction of new customs and the erosion of local and national traditions.

The above mentioned developments have created considerable political space for national populist movements and parties for accommodating people who feel they no longer have an input in their parties, communities and in their country as a whole on how immigration should be managed, the economy is run, and on how customs and traditions should be respected. Rationalist political theory as informed by Jurgen Habermas' (1992; 1997) work in communication and deliberation would situate political campaigns in the public sphere where deliberative debate takes place and public opinion is formulated. According to this theory, voters and campaigners are formally connected to official institutions through the existence of two intermediary public spheres, namely the "informal" and "formal" public spheres. The "informal" public sphere involves voluntary associations, political campaigners and associations. Habermas (ibid.) argues that in the "informal" public sphere, deliberation is mainly unofficial and unorganised, yet this is the space where public opinion is formed. The "formal" public sphere includes political institutions and fora such as the parliament and political party conferences whose organisation and function needs to reflect the considered public opinion of the "informal" public sphere.

Even though the accounts of Eatwell and Goodwin (2019) and Guilluy (2019) outline the reasons for the advent of national populism in western democracies they do not engage with

the political communication of marginalisation and inequality. In other words, these accounts lack a cultural dimension for the analysis of the meaning of victimhood in contemporary politics. In contrast, the present article follows a cultural sociological method informed by Alexander's (2011; 2017) theoretical elaborations on performance and power in order to assess how the cultural performance of victimhood creates the context for the rise and legitimisation of populism. To that effect, the rational public sphere of considered opinion gives its place to the public stage as a symbolic forum in which actors can create their own performances addressed to specific audiences. The public stage of election campaigns eliminates the gap between the formal and the informal and allows actors to perform their problems, grievances and demands in a creative and dramatic way. Rather than focusing exclusively on the political and economic conditions for the understanding of victimhood and populism, the article redirects the focus on the main agents and actors and in particular on the staging, narrative and performance of victimhood.

#### **4. The Performance of Victimhood**

The Brexit Party and the wider Vote Leave campaign brought to the foreground of politics the victimisation of the post-industrial working class and its discursive construction as a marginalised ethnic group. However, there existed a strong political and cultural background with respect to the importance of these issues in media and political discourses. Not so long-ago class was considered a problematic and divisive issue in political and media discourses. Class was replaced by references to social mobility and to the hard-working families of Britain. The reluctance to talk about class and class divisions in Britain was mainly a product of the Labour Party's strategy in the late 1990s to position itself in the ideological centre ground and declare a truce amongst the working, middle and upper classes (Evans, 2001). New Labour's strategy was informed by the assumption as well as aspiration that the advent of knowledge

economy would render the working class and class hierarchies as parochial and ultimately obsolete. The transition from Labour to New Labour legitimised the belief that old Labour was in terminal decline and that the working class was no longer relevant as an economic and political category (Crudas, 2008; Rutherford, 2011). New Labour's embrace of globalisation as an irreversible positive force inevitably determined the function of the state and government with regard to welfare and social protection: "not to resist the force of globalisation, but to prepare for it, and to garner its vast potential benefits" (Blair, 2005).

The re-appearance of the discourse of class at the beginning of the 2008 global financial crisis highlighted two rather incompatible manifestations of working class culture. While class appeared to be a rather anachronistic socio-political concept for the understanding of ownership, taxation, workers' rights and wealth redistribution, the racialised class and more specifically the white working class became a potent explanatory tool for race and ethnic relations, the waning of traditional ways of life, and for immigration patterns and policies (Sveinsson, 2009). Consequently, the working class became an endangered ethnic group and the binary opposite of the corporate and cultural elites (Gillborn, 2010; Bonnett, 1998). On the other hand, the working class appeared as an ongoing problem to be managed by policies aiming at limiting welfare provision, cutting down benefits and encouraging people to enter the competitive labour market. Politicians across the ideological and political party spectrum indulged in an updated version of the old yet highly efficient governing strategy of categorising people into the respectable working class and the underserving poor respectively (Arneson, 1997; Gilborn, 2010; Mckenzie, 2017).

Amid concerns about the waning status of the working class in New Labour's Britain sentiments of betrayal and neglect were voiced in order to explain and legitimate the increasing

popularity and vibrant political presence of the far Right (Watt and Wintour, 2015). From BBC's (2007a) "White Season" in 2008 focusing on Enoch Powell's infamous Rivers of Blood speech and the decline of a working men's club in Bradford to Labour MP Margaret Hodge's (BBC, 2007b) justification of her constituents' xenophobic sentiments due to the uncontrolled arrival of black and ethnic minority communities, whiteness came to dominate the definition and cultural presence of the British working class.

The campaign material of the Brexit Party in the 2019 European Parliament and General Elections relies on the established collective identity of the working class and at the same time communicates in dramatic terms its social marginalisation and cultural irrelevance in world largely defined by the aesthetic values of globalisation and multiculturalism. The intended audience of this message is the marginalised working class as de facto victims and potential voters who have been betrayed by the Labour party. Once a victim realises the harm inflicted on her/him constitutes a violation of ethical, cultural and political norms then eventually s/he has to communicate this specific experience on a wider ideological stage in order to attract the attention of others. The state of victimhood is achieved by the dual processes of forming a collective identity and the demand for recognition of such an identity. First, individuals can see themselves as victims if they can attach themselves to an existing collective identity or are able to construct one. Second, victimhood is achieved when a target audience in a position of cultural and/or political authority recognises the claims of the victims.

As part of the European Parliament elections campaign the Brexit Party released a campaign video on Twitter titled "Labour was the party of the working class". The video opens with archive footage from the early and mid-1970s. Working class Labour voters are watching on TV Labour MP Peter Shore giving his famous talk in the Oxford Union Debate in 1975. On

the eve of the 1975 referendum on membership of what would become the EU, Peter Shore attacks the fear mongering of the “pro-marketeters” and urges the nation to choose “independence”. The Brexit Party video capitalises on sentiments of nostalgia by showing children cycling and playing in the streets and working men having a chat nearby a scrapyard. At the same time on-screen information reminds Twitter followers and the wider electorate that “Labour were staunchly Eurosceptic”. This otherwise hyperbolic statement is supported by footage of Tony Benn delivering a speech at the House of Commons pointing out the undemocratic nature of the EU and the Eurozone. The Brexit Party video establishes Labour’s ideological break with its roots by projecting the dawn of New Labour in a completely different social and cultural context. Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1997 to 2007 and Prime Minister from 2007 up until 2010, is shown raising his ministerial box for the cameras outside 11 Downing Street followed by his now infamous exchange with the Labour voter Gillian Duffy whose concerns about immigration were dismissed as “bigoted” (Weaver, 2010). The imagery of old Labour’s heartlands, of Northern industrial towns populated by working men and children roaming free in the streets is replaced by the imagery of the City of London and of Islington in North London. In this new and shiny environment, children are wearing baseball caps, playing Xbox, and watching Tony Blair speeches on their MacBook with their parents. A sequence of video extracts showing Lord Andrew Adonis on LBC insisting that Labour is the party of Remain, of Tony Blair at World Economic Forum in Davos, and of bearded men tasting wine feeds into the perception that Labour are not only the party of Remain but also the party of the political and cultural establishment.

Soon after its success at the European Parliament elections, The Brexit Party resumed the attack on Labour as part of its campaign to fill in candidates for the forthcoming general election with a new video released on Twitter titled “Labour is the party of Dalston, not Doncaster”. This

time the Brexit Party focuses exclusively on the present and emphasises how neglected and poor Labour's heartlands have become. The video takes us to Doncaster, South Yorkshire. The town centre looks bleak, grey and deserted, shop fronts are padlocked, and roller blinds graffitied. Nigel Farage, the leader of the Brexit Party, is shown giving a speech in a local venue, telling his audience that "the Labour Party is now totally and utterly disconnected from its Northern roots, its people and its voters. Labour thinks you're stupid - The Labour Party thinks they know better. And it's the Labour Party now completely and utterly dominated from London". Nigel Farage uses the rhetorical technique of alliteration in order to emphasise Labour's betrayal of its heartlands. "Labour is a party that represents Islington not Islwyn, it's a party that represents Hampstead not Huddersfield, Dalston not Doncaster". White, elder men and women, traditional working class people are shaking hands with Nigel Farage, affirming that the cultural void created by Labour has now been filled by the Brexit Party in a celebratory mood amplified by emotive music.

On the 20th of November 2019, three weeks before polling day, the Brexit Party released its general election broadcast. The broadcast starts with two men in a military uniform observing the 2019 Remembrance Day. A male voice-over sets the national mood over Brexit and politics in general: "an awful lot of people think they are not being listened to. If you've got a clear mandate telling you actually, we want to leave, you can see why people might get angry about that" (Nigel Farage, 2019). A slow sequence of images of service men, wastelands and derelict buildings is annotated with the voting record of "traditional Labour voters" (*ibid.*) and the electoral promises of the Labour Party during the 2017 general election campaign. The Brexit Party refers to the "five million Labour voters" (*ibid.*) who voted to leave the EU, and how Labour broke its promise to respect the result of the referendum. The man whose voice introduces the broadcast is shown in his kitchen drinking tea. His message is that "traditional"



Labour voters will never vote for the Conservatives and the only choice they have if they want to get Brexit is to vote for the Brexit Party. From the man's kitchen, viewers are taken to a cafe, to a living room, and to an office where mostly frail people are keen to declare their pride and resilience but also to criticise a social and political system that has systematically failed them. Doctors, military veterans, financial advisors and carers are "motivated by a sincere desire to leave the European Union" (*ibid.*). The bleak depiction of Labour's "heartlands" as an unidentified wasteland is positively accentuated by wreaths, red poppies, the flags of St George, Royal Navy, Great Britain and the medals of military veterans. The election broadcast concludes with the leader of the Brexit Party greeted by adulating crowds. His message to them and the viewers is that Leave voters should not waste their vote on any other party; they should vote for the Brexit Party on December the 12th.

### **5. The Making of the "Traditional" Working Class**

From a cultural sociological perspective, the factual issues surrounding Brexit such as employment, income, welfare and immigration, and the policies proposed to solve them are not the only important components for the struggle for power. The symbolic language, the staging, actors and narrative within which these issues are framed and communicated constitute the main props for the Brexit Party's electoral appeal and success. The political campaign of the Brexit Party refers to things that exist in the UK but makes clear it is not exclusively about these things. Every issue raised in the Brexit Party political campaign videos is associated with a set of binaries formulated around the cultural value of tradition, identity and rootedness. These binaries are set in motion in order to depict the working class as a victim and Labour as a party ideologically removed from its traditional electoral base. The cultural performance of victimhood and Labour's alleged alliance with the middle class indicate the existence of an *Other* in relation to geography, employment, class, character, and age.

Table 1. The Discourse of Brexit

The discourse of Brexit gains its legitimacy through the making of the traditional working class and by establishing the latter's social, cultural and political identity and location. Nostalgia, the association of the working class with Brexit and of London with ethnic minorities and the elite, and the appropriation of the language of identity politics set the scene for actors who have been ignored yet their memories, cultural significance and marginalised economic status constitute a powerful electoral weapon.

However, the Brexit Party's performance of victimhood does not offer an exit from the condition of victimhood but instead utilises Brexit for the constitution of an idealised past. This particular political and cultural shift from the politics of hope and of investing in the future to capitalising in a vaguely remembered or even fictitious past has been described by Zygmunt Bauman (2017) as "retrotopia". For Bauman (ibid.) this "retrotopian" environment is dominated by two processes: the longing of a strong state reminiscent of the state described in Hobbes' classic text *Leviathan*, and the re-tribalisation of societies demarcated by competing narratives and memories and clear distinctions of "us" and "them". Whereas the Hobessian state calls for the organisation of communities around the fear of greatest evil and consequently for a strong, undivided government capable of preventing anarchy, the free market requires from the state a modest managerial role where welfare and precarity, safety and danger have to be carefully balanced for sustaining motivation and belief in globalisation, free trade and labour mobility. The Brexit Party attempts to reconcile its lack of criticism of free markets with appeals to a strong state protecting its citizens from the EU's federal aspirations and uncontrolled immigration flows by painting the picture a glorious military past and a bleak present. The political campaign of the Brexit Party for the 2019 European and General Election mobilises a range of widely recognised cultural markers from St George's flag and working

class domestic environments in the North to red poppy wreaths in order to tell a story of a powerless country full of pride of its traditions and rituals. The goal is two-fold. First, the campaign wants to ignore or even delete from the political map the social and cultural complexities of working class life. Second, the campaign wants to de-politicise the working class by suggesting a new alliance between the post-industrial working class and the vote to leave the EU.

The Brexit Party might have successfully constructed an ethnically homogeneous group of people as victims but in doing so disregards multiple forms of victimhood and diverse experiences of insecurity and poverty. The erosion of collective bargaining and the sustained decline of the institutional power of workers across a wide variety of workplaces and organisations have led to lower wages and insecure employment contracts. Even though such practices and mentalities were in the past limited to manual labour are now affecting professions and classes previously defined by a relative strong sense of prosperity and of social and work security. What has become known as “precarisation” (Dörre, 2015, Lorey, 2015; Maronitis, 2019) serves as an instrument of governmental control for disciplining and controlling those seeking employment as well as those already in employment. The labelling of London as an affluent area dominated by banking and a thriving service economy and locating the working class exclusively in the North of England conceal contemporary forms of victimhood such as exploitation in the gig economy, homelessness, poor housing conditions and poverty in cosmopolitan areas. At the same time the crude association of the working class with Brexit and the Brexit Party leads to the problematic classification of ethnic minorities, residents of metropolitan areas, and those with access to higher education as cosmopolitan and elite.

Despite its strong and receptive appeals to tradition the Brexit Party urges the victims of globalisation to break the traditional bonds of political membership and attachment. The Brexit Party campaign indicates that established political parties and more specifically Labour and its affiliated trade unions are not willing to defend the interests of the working class. The “traditional” working class are no longer convinced by the narrative of economic growth and progress, of multiculturalism, labour mobility and the advent of the knowledge economy. The strong appeal to tradition and to the way things used to be is accompanied by even a stronger appeal to endorse a newly established party whose main concern is respect for and implementation of the result of the referendum. In that sense tradition can only be respected and recognised through the endorsement of a non-traditional and politically disruptive party.

The campaign of the Brexit Party adopts the language of anti-imperialist and anti-globalisation movements and of identity politics in order to propound the grievances and victimhood of the “traditional” working class. The most common issues surrounding identity politics are race, gender and sexuality rather than class. Globalisation, the dominance of financial services in the economy, and the prioritisation of corporate interests over the national interest have weakened communal, class and national ties. Such a weakening has enabled nationalist populist agents such as the Brexit Party to mobilise support among the disaffected working class and point towards a white working class culture. Yet, the Brexit Party’s language lacks economic context and reduces the working class to a specific racial and ethnic group in need of recognition by political authorities and policymakers. In particular, the Brexit Party carefully avoids the binaries of capitalism and socialism, public ownership and privatisation, welfare state and market economy, progressive tax and low tax, protection and deregulation in order to present Brexit as an issue that arises out of identity concerns. The emphasis on the recognition of the traditional working class identity at the expense of redistribution of wealth is given despite the

amplification of social inequalities caused by the ascendancy of global markets, flexible and insecure labour and the waning of the welfare state. Nancy Fraser (2000: 108) calls this process “the problem of displacement” and Ulrich Beck (2005: 120) talks about “relegation to second place” and “concealment” of the socio-economic redistribution by the question of “cultural dominance”. The displacement of economic concerns, social security and working conditions is not the only communicative strategy of the Brexit Party for the making of the traditional working class. By drawing attention to an authentic, unaltered and most importantly self-generated collective identity, the Brexit Party’s performance and definition of a victimised working class denies the complexity of working lives and narrows down or even eliminates various forms of cultural affiliations. Following Fraser’s (2000; 2018) argument on the relationship between redistribution and recognition, the great irony of this performance is that it contributes to the misrecognition of working class identity by ignoring struggles within the groups for cultural authority and political representation.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article has put forward a two-fold argument. First, the cultural performance of victimhood by the Brexit Party is a precondition for contemporary articulations of nationalism and belonging. Second, the cultural performance of victimhood is an indispensable component for the political communication of loss, democratic deficit and for presenting the post-industrial working class as a racialised minority. By applying Jeffrey Alexander’s cultural sociological method to the Brexit Party’ political campaign the article points out that attitudes towards Brexit as well as manifestations of working class experience do not exclusively derive from material conditions but also from collective memories and grievances as well as from idealised conceptions of the past. Identifying a political campaign as a performance event turns social actors into protagonists and antagonists whose cultural and political battles set the wider Brexit

debate in motion. Regardless of the socio-economic urgencies, which appoint the working class as the *de facto* supporters of Brexit, the article depicts the Brexit Party as the main performer and its political campaign as a powerful performance structured around a set of binary oppositions. The central theme of these oppositions is the relationship the working class has developed with time and with the Labour Party. Indeed, the present as depicted by the Brexit Party is a foreign country for the working class. Globalisation, finance, consumerism, service economy, multiculturalism, and liberal social values constitute an alienating environment that has been supported by the Labour Party and can be dismantled by the Brexit Party.

Yet, the Brexit Party's performance of victimhood systematically avoids setting a binary opposition to capitalism. The failure to mention the contemporary exploitative strategies of the competitive labour market, the waning of the welfare state, poor housing and falling living standards in metropolitan areas, and the exclusion of non-white workers from this performative composition of a victimised working class suggests that old and new process of victimisation are independent of capitalism. For all its disruptive qualities, the Brexit Party does not diverge from the conventional language of identity politics. The demand for the recognition of a supposed distinct cultural and ethnic group of people takes primacy over cultural complexities and political and economic concerns.

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