Political community and the new parochialism: Brexit and the reimagination of British liberalism and conservatism

Mark I. Vail¹

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Abstract

This article analyzes the evolution of discourses surrounding Brexit and interprets them in the context of broader shifts in the character of British liberal and conservative traditions since the 1990s. It argues that the evolution of debates about Britain's place in Europe, the 2016 referendum, and its aftermath can be usefully understood using the analytical frames, derived from Tönnies and Weber, of *Gemeinschaft*, or “community,” and *Gesellschaft*, or “society.” It suggests further that the discourses surrounding Brexit and prevailing interpretations of it have been shaped by exhumed and redeployed strands of British liberal and conservative thought and only partially successful attempts to fashion a new synthesis among them. It shows that supporters of Brexit have engaged in a strategy of “negative integration,” casting Britain as a territorially defensive nation defending itself against external “others” in ways that have been informed by these redeployed traditions. It concludes that these dynamics have resulted in and reflected a deeply fractured British society and have highlighted the prevalence of political amateurism in the British political class.

It is a truism that the era of contemporary British politics, roughly since the rise of Margaret Thatcher, has been one of ideological and political volatility. Thatcher's repudiation of post-war social democracy and her replacement of the underlying Labour-Tory consensus with “conviction politics” represented a sort of patricide against the Disraelian “One-Nation Toryism” out of which the modern Conservative Party had grown.¹ In parallel fashion, and in partial reaction to Thatcher's embrace

¹ For a discussion, see Gamble (1988). Robert Tombs (2016, 505) has characterized Disraeli's One-Nationism as “a more or less coherent Conservative creed as the non-reactionary promoter of national cohesion, defending Burkean traditional influences against ideological abstractions, unwanted interference and democratic enthusiasm.”

✉ Mark I. Vail
vailm@wfu.edu

¹ Worrell Chair of Politics and International Affairs, Department of Politics and International Affairs, Wake Forest University, Kirby Hall 314A, P.O. Box 7568, Winston-Salem, NC 27109, USA

of an atomized neoliberalism and a zero-sum, adversarial conception of politics, the Labour Party first migrated into a land of far-Left electoral irrelevance in the early 1980s, and subsequently embraced an ostensibly humane liberalism under the aegis of Tony Blair's New Labour in the late 1990s.² Just as Thatcher, and to a lesser extent her successors John Major and David Cameron, offered a reformulated conservatism defined in opposition to Disraeli, late twentieth-century Labour defined itself in opposition to both doctrinaire, trade-unionist Marxism and the reformist post-war neo-Fabianism of William Beveridge, Clement Atlee, and T.H. Marshall. Both the British Left and Right, then, ended the twentieth century with new syntheses starkly opposed to many of their traditional precepts, apparently representing the continued evolution of both wings of British politics toward a more atomized, less communal, and more market-oriented conception of their own political programs.

"Brexit" has upended this Whiggish conventional wisdom. The 2016 referendum on Britain's exit from the European Union, and the long, grueling, and highly uncertain process of negotiating the character of that departure, reflected a set of interconnected, emotionally irredentist claims that reflected an exhumation, reconsideration, and redeployment of competing strands of British liberalism and conservatism left behind by late twentieth-century British political modernization. With respect to liberalism, discourses surrounding Brexit have reactivated a variant of the social liberalism embodied in the work of figures such as L.T. Hobhouse (1942 [1911]), T.H. Green (1986 [1937]), and John Hobson (1974), thereby bringing to the fore a more collectivist understanding of society and a more robust conception of state responsibility. These reactivated strands of British liberalism echo some of the precepts of New Labour about shared opportunity but without the soft moralism, rationalism, and embrace of the market of the Blairite "Third Way." On the conservative side, Brexit and debates surrounding it have reflected a popular rejection of the atomized vision of Thatcher in favor of a return to Disraelian One-Nation Toryism but with a heavy overlay of Burkean organicism and celebration of traditional morality and (albeit selective) national identity.³ This move has been colored by powerful strands of anti-élitism and ethnonationalism, informed by parochial conceptions of political community in place of the individualist and cosmopolitan worldviews broadly shared, for all of their differences over policy, by both Labour and the Conservatives by the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This reimagining of the contours and key debates of British politics, I argue, can usefully be understood in terms of the Weberian conception of *Gemeinschaft*, or "community," with its connotations of organic connection, shared identity, and parochialism, in place of established conceptions of *Gesellschaft*, or "society," with attendant notions of individualism, freedom of association, and an ecumenical and transnational association of shared values and preferences. These categories provide

² For a critical analysis of the rise and ideological commitments of New Labour, see Bevir (2005).

³ Edmund Burke celebrates the "unbought grace of life" in contrast to the transactional and abstract views of the "sophisters, economists, and calculators." Such a contrast would later inform debates between traditional conservatives and the Manchester school, as well as that between "One-Nation Toryism" and Thatcherite neoliberals (Freeman, 1980, ch. 3).

a useful set of analytical frames for understanding the tensions within the competing positions and discourses that have emerged in the debates and political contention surrounding Brexit, tensions reflected in the invocation of various elements of the British liberal and conservative traditions, understood, to borrow Mark Bevir and Jason Blakely's (2018, p. 48) formulation, as "ideational background[s] against which individuals adopt an initial web of beliefs." I explore why the narratives surrounding Brexit have evolved as they have, emphasizing the contingent and multifarious character of these competing sets of traditions.⁴ I suggest that the "*Gesellschaft/Gemeinschaft*" contrast helps us to understand the tensions and dialogue among elements of the liberal and conservative traditions in Britain and how they have been deployed (or, in some cases, marginalized) in the competing narratives surrounding Brexit.

In this context, I argue that the narratives surrounding Brexit have invoked elements of British liberalism and conservatism in ways that have been defined as much by what they reject and oppose as what they embrace. Advocates of Brexit have, with varying degrees of coherence, championed a visceral, organicist politics, yearning for a restoration of a certain idea of social cohesion, reimagined as threatened by the EU. Ironically, such appeals have been effective in part because Tory policies of monetarist austerity have exacerbated the economic dislocation and insecurity arising from post-1970s deindustrialization and economic decline. Brexiteers' organicist appeals to a quasi-mythical, lost British social and economic community have been colored by an aggressive Euroscepticism bound up in a defensive territoriality in which British (and more particularly English) virtues have been contrasted to the "European" vices of rationalism, elitism, individualism, and cosmopolitanism. In echoes of what Mark Philp (1995, 44, 54) has characterized as "vulgar conservatism" in early-nineteenth-century Britain, centered on a loyalist "popular insurrection" deeply hostile to French Jacobinism, Brexit advocates have emphasized "a distinction between the rational and irrational which implicitly overr[ides] (or, at least condition[s]) the significance of more traditional distinctions within the properly political community." In this way, they have built upon the legacies of Thatcherism, for which hostility to "Europe" gradually became less about the Continent and more about a statement of shared British identity, thereby creating a "'structure of feeling' that has made the project of leaving the European Union politically possible." (Kunzru 2019, pp. 4–6).

This conflation of British *cum* English identity with hostility to Europe is redolent of what German historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler (1970) labelled "negative integration," by which he meant Bismarck's gambit of solidifying political support for a hollow democracy through a politics of enemies. For Brexiteers, these enemies—in particular meddling EU bureaucrats and immigrants threatening both economic livelihood and social homogeneity—are cast as potential invaders to be repulsed. Such assertions of a visceral, organicist social and political order undermined by external "others," echo a "defensive territoriality" dating back to early nineteenth-century

⁴ In this way, my approach echoes Rogers Smith's (1993) idea that multiple traditions are constantly in dialogue with one another and reconstruct themselves over time.

rejections of Continental rationalism, Catholicism, and absolutism, as Linda Colley (2009 [1992]) has described.⁵ In this respect, pro-Brexit discourses can be understood as deployments of nostalgic notions of lost British greatness and an ethnonationalist and defensive conception of “Englishness.” This frame helps us to understand the apparently paradoxical positions within the Conservative and Labour parties, the scrambling of traditional partisan divides in the referendum, and the fecklessness of the “Remain” campaign, whose agenda resorted to an invocation of an élite cosmopolitanism hitched to relatively hollow conceptions of European political community.

Below, I explore the genealogies of competing strands of the British liberal and conservative traditions since the nineteenth century, emphasizing the contrast between the concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* in elements of the British liberal and conservative traditions. I then apply this frame to the debates and discourses surrounding Brexit, which reflect related dilemmas about the character and contours of the British political community. I conclude with a brief discussion of Brexit’s implementation and the implications for Britain’s future and that of the European Union.

Reimaging Community: Brexit and the political reactivation of collectivist political traditions

Max Weber’s *Economy and Society* introduced into widening usage the contrast between the concepts of *Gemeinschaft*, translated conventionally but imprecisely as “community,” and *Gesellschaft*, traditionally rendered as “society.” Though the distinction was inherited from Tönnies’s earlier work, Weber’s development of the concepts and the work of his subsequent translators and promoters, notably Talcott Parsons in the United States, helped to enshrine them as foundational concepts for twentieth-century sociology. The original distinction involved a contrast between forms of social organization that were organic, collectivist, essentialist/holistic and identarian (*Gemeinschaft*), and those that were volitional, rational, individualistic, and spontaneous (*Gesellschaft*). Weber’s contrast between the two conceptions rested on the difference between “open” and “closed” associations:

A social relationship, regardless of whether it is communal or associative in character, will be spoken of as “open” to outsiders if and insofar as its system of order does not deny participation to anyone who wishes to join and is actually in a position to do so. A relationship will, on the other hand, be called “closed” against outsiders so far as, according to its subjective meaning

⁵ Colley connects early nineteenth-century fears of invasion and the insecurities and tensions within modern British identity: “Whereas the Germans and the French still tend to see a Europe without frontiers in terms of opportunity, the British—and especially though not exclusively the English—are more inclined to view it as a threat.... [T]heir apparent insularity is to be explained [in part] by their growing doubts about who they are in the present” (p. 383).

and binding rules, participation of certain persons is excluded, limited, or subjected to certain conditions.

In the case of “closed” associations, a “communal relationship” emerges “when this feeling [of connection] leads to a mutual orientation of their behavior,” creating the kind of organic, identarian, and holistic association generative of *Gemeinschaft* (Weber 1978 [1922], pp. 43–44).

These distinctive visions of social organization and political community echo tendencies within the broad traditions of British liberalism and conservatism, as they have evolved since the foundation of what might reasonably be called the British “nation” in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. From that time, competing models of inclusion and exclusion, the relationship between individual subject-citizens and the state/crown, and assertions about the ethnic, religious, and national basis of the British political community have been activated, often in defensive contrast to “others” that were “partly real and partly imagined” (Colley 2009 [1992], xix). Over the course of the nineteenth century, various strands of British liberalism and conservatism, often in dialogue with one another, struggled with the paradox of a Britain that was at once separate and exceptional and yet a model of Imperial dominance and stable democratizing politics. Because Britain was among the world’s pioneers in mass political incorporation, beginning with the 1832 Reform Act and continuing until the eve of World War I, neither liberalism nor conservatism, both traditionally skeptical of mass suffrage, could remain elite affairs, as in, say, Prussia or Italy. Equally fluid was the relationship between Englishness and Britishness, terms that were conflated and set apart as circumstances dictated. In contrast to the conventional view that the Empire was an essentially English project, Linda Colley argues that it emerged from and was consolidated by a sense of external threat (particularly from France, its Revolution, and Napoleon), giving meaning to Eric Hobsbawm’s observation in the British context that “there is no more effective way of bonding together the disparate sections of restless peoples than to unite them against outsiders” (Colley 2009 [1992], pp. xxv–xxvi). This sense of defensive territoriality, combined with evolving notions of British liberty and self-sufficiency, helped to create a fluid yet well-defined sense of British national identity that “was often embraced and invoked by different groupings for their own specific reasons and purposes” (Colley 2009 [1992], p. xxvi).

These historical legacies—defensive territoriality, English *cum* British exceptionalism, and competing models of political inclusion and exclusion—created the ideational, ideological, and conceptual universe within which and in whose terms competing discourses over Brexit and Britain’s relationship with the EU have evolved since the 1970s. This has meant reengaging with elements of social liberalism, expressed in the writings of Hobhouse, Hobson, and others who view the state as constitutive of a community characterized by humans’ mutual obligation and reliance, in contrast to the atomized, hyper-individualistic and rationalistic understandings advanced by classical liberalism and Thatcherite neoliberalism. With respect to conservatism, Brexit advocates have sought to return to quasi-Burkean conceptions of society as constituted by an organic, socially embedded, and

historically contingent community. In both contexts, Brexit advocates sought both to replace political rationalism and atomized understandings of British politics with an emphasis upon community, but to do so in a way colored by ethnonationalist conceptions of British-*cum*-English nationhood. In this way, the terms of the debate over Brexit transcended divisions between neo-Thatcherite neoliberal conservatism and the pseudo-communal “Third Way” of Tony Blair, in a return to a more visceral, organic, and exclusionary conception of British society. Doing so required an “other” against whom this redefined community should struggle and resist, a role served by both immigrants and the EU, both of which posed an ostensible threat to Eurosceptics’ and Brexiteers’ vision of a sovereign and decidedly English political community.⁶

British conservatism has long been at ease with organicist models of society, which formed one of its conceptual touchstones as early as the seventeenth century. For many British Tories in the nineteenth century (as, somewhat differently, for the Whig forbears of nineteenth-century liberalism), the Glorious Revolution of 1688 represented the crowning achievement of British political moderation, founded upon the primacy of Parliamentary sovereignty but with a highly restricted suffrage and emphasis upon property. Though a Whig, Edmund Burke’s celebration of these virtues would become a touchstone for the subsequent evolution of British conservatism (Leach 2002, p. 52). Burke’s repudiation of the Revolution’s radical rationalism and individualism emphasizes (limited) monarchy, stability, and tradition, and his skepticism of individualism, informed a view of society that evolves slowly, is defined by its communal identity and celebrates collective wisdom accrued over generations. For Burke, “[s]ociety is indeed a contract.... As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born” (2017 [1790], p. 54). This appeal to history as the basis of political community and consent was heavily anti-individualistic: “Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and the passions brought into subjection.” (Burke, quoted in Murphey 1982, p. 46). Rather than out of abstract reason, Burke argued, “reform should grow organically out of the past and should be based on ‘precedent, authority, and example’” (Leach 2002, p. 52).

These elements of Burkean conservatism found echoes in the Brexit campaign, even as Brexiteers appealed to other, more inclusive and ecumenical strands in the British conservative tradition. In particular, the mid-nineteenth-century “One-Nation Toryism” of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli sought to extend the appeal of conservatism beyond the squirearchy to the rapidly expanding working class,

⁶ Fintan O’Toole (2019) argues that the EU came to serve as a proxy for the Nazis in the minds of many Brexit advocates. In this context, claims of oppression and threats of “invasion” created opportunities for struggle and martyrdom, and the EU came to be seen as the primary “other.” As a result, “It does not matter greatly what the European Union is or what it is doing—its function in the plot is to be a more insidious form of Nazism” (46).

advocating social reform and a political inclusivity that would have been anathema to Burke. In moving beyond the hidebound, class-basis of the Tory Party, Disraeli combined political acumen and authentic empathy for the working class. Like Burke, he believed in a natural social hierarchy, but tempered by a robust sense of *noblesse oblige*, itself the basis for a durable, organic connection between workers and both landed gentry and burgeoning commercial elites. In Samuel Beer's description (1982 [1965], p. 267), "if in Disraeli's thought the ideal social order was hierarchic, it was also organic in the sense that its respective classes were joined together by powerful ties of positive mutual obligation." This worldview was starkly opposed to the atomistic *laissez-faire* of the Manchester School, acknowledging the class basis of social organization even as it sought to transcend the divides that it produced (Leach 2002, pp. 60–61).

These themes of collectivist engagement and mutual obligation found echoes, albeit in a somewhat different key, in later strands of Conservative thought, notably that of Michael Oakeshott. Oakeshott synthesizes elements of individualism and collectivism with a jaundiced view of prevailing notions of "society," which, he argues, "has no moral or intellectual worth" (Oakeshott 1975, p. 87). Deeply distrustful of abstract templates of social order, Oakeshott views human behavior and preferences as the products of learned experience, a notion which leads him to urge "deep respect for the individual action," even as he contends that "conduct *inter homines* is the association of agents (each engaged in seeking his own chosen satisfactions) in terms of mutual participations." In terms redolent of the appeals of many Brexit advocates, Oakeshott argues that human beings need "moral languages," as they are "are apt to be disconcerted unless they feel themselves to be upheld by something more substantial than the emanations of their own contingent imaginations." This effort to balance a celebration of the individual with an emphasis on humans' shared inheritances leads Oakeshott to advance a conception of *lex*, or "rules which prescribe the common responsibilities (and the counterpart 'rights' to have these responsibilities fulfilled) of agents and in terms of which they put by their characters as enterprisers and put by all that differentiates them from one another and recognize themselves as formal equals" (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 57, 80, 106, 128). This Hohfeldian emphasis on mutual recognition and the concomitance of rights and obligations in effect de-rationalizes society and reconfigures the concept into something closer to Weberian *Gemeinschaft*,⁷ with a basis in shared experiences and "moral languages" rather than commitment to rationalistic or utilitarian constructs.⁸ In this way, Oakeshott's views complement and build upon the older and more explicitly collectivist understandings of Burke and Disraeli, colored by the more democratic

⁷ In the early twentieth century, legal scholar and Yale Law Professor Wesley Hohfeld systematized analysis of legal relationships, postulating sets of conceptual "pairs," neither of whose members could be understood in isolation. In his conception, "rights" enjoyed by one party must correspond to concomitant "duties" borne by others. For a detailed discussion, see Fried (1998), 51–54.

⁸ At a talk at LSE in 1965, Friedrich Hayek presented a conceptual overview of Oakeshott's ideas, in which he emphasized the latter's distinction between rationalist "normocracy," in which "order is formed spontaneously as a result of the separate efforts of many individuals," and "teleocracy," in which "order is formed by *organization or arrangement* (original italics). I thank Martyn Thompson for this reference.

ethos of the contemporary era, even as they reflect some of the same tensions and dilemmas.

Against a backdrop of forty years of Thatcherite neoliberalism, Brexit activated reinterpreted versions of these older strands of British conservatism. Brexit advocates appealed to a certain conception of a social and political community ravaged by deindustrialization and fiscal austerity, in apparent rejection of Thatcher's neoliberal order of atomized, rational, and self-interested individuals. It is no coincidence that some of the strongest support for Brexit came from regions in the North and Midlands hardest hit by post-1970s industrial decline, where the growing need for social protection corresponded to its declining generosity (Vail 2020).⁹ This discursive shift sought both to include and represent the British working class (including many former Labour voters who had shifted to the Tories during the 1990s and 2000s) and to exclude immigrants, who were perceived as illegitimate claimants on the nation's resources. Thus expansive and exclusionary in equal measure, discourses surrounding Brexit were built upon a yearning for a lost network of social connection, but one which defined itself in opposition to both a European and immigrant "other."¹⁰ This move reflected the altered political and social reality faced by voters in both the working and middle classes. Thatcherite neoliberalism had become increasingly anathema for voters, whose growing economic dislocation in the wake of economic stagnation and fiscal austerity had helped to fuel rising resentment and anti-systemic politics on both the far Left and the far Right. Following the Great Recession, growing numbers of voters, including many erstwhile Labour supporters, turned to the more exclusionary, parochial, and xenophobic elements of Tory doctrine that had become increasingly prevalent since the 1990s. Following the devastating effects of austerity under Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer David Osborne and its subsequent widespread discrediting, Conservatives increasingly turned to the politics of enemies and xenophobic and Europhobic discourses as a means to solidify political support, even as their personal commitment to "rampant individualism" and a Thatcherite "small state" remained undiminished (Shenker 2019). In this sense, Brexit can usefully be viewed, not as a cause of British social and economic dislocation, but rather as a symptom of the growing divide between the economic priorities of the Conservative Party and its voters, accompanying a growing convergence between their social and cultural discourses and worldviews. Exploring the genealogy of this combination of xenophobic parochialism and a "One-Nation" return to *Gemeinschaft*, Fintan O'Toole argues that Brexit advocates hearkened back to the British Empire, in fear of a sort of reverse colonization represented by immigration, for which they blamed the EU: "These unarmed invaders [immigrants] can be compared to the Nazis who in turn can be compared to the EU, which is equally a form of unarmed invasion. This metaphor does crucial work for

⁹ In the East Midlands, where 59.3% voted for "Leave," median weekly wages were £483, the lowest in the country outside of Northern Ireland (UK Office for National Statistics, 2016).

¹⁰ Referendum data that show strong support, not only from areas with declining relative incomes and rising economic insecurity, but also in relatively ethnically homogeneous ones with recent increases in in-migration (Vail, 2015).

Brexit: it fuses the war, the end of Empire, immigration and the EU into a single image” (O’Toole 2018, p. 92). Here, Colley’s nationalizing fear of invasion is synthesized with Wehler’s elite project of “negative integration” to inform a reconstituted political coalition marked by xenophobia and defensive parochialism.

Even as Brexit drew upon this double game by British Conservatives, it also relied upon the deployment of latent strands of British liberal traditions that had been superseded and obscured by Manchesterian *laissez-faire* and its neoliberal heirs. The evolution of British liberal discourse reflected a return to older, more communal and organic conceptions that grew out of the pre-World-War-I and inter-war eras. In particular, late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century social liberalism, which built on Gladstone’s “plebian liberalism” to move beyond “what had until then an aristocratic club otherwise known as the Liberal Party” (Hadley 2010, p. 292), sought to distance the doctrine from its earlier Manchesterian incarnation and the narrow commercial elites that had been its principal architects. Central to this so-called “New Liberalism” were the conjoined conceptions of community and mutual obligation, married to an affirmative conception of the social contract in place of the arid and atomized vision of *laissez-faire*.¹¹ T.H. Green, a seminal figure of the movement, succinctly captures the essence of this conception: “[W]hen we speak of freedom,... we do not mean merely freedom from restraint or compulsion.... We mean by it a power which each man exercises through the help or security given to him by his fellow-men, and which he in turn helps to secure for them.” (Eccleshall 1986, p. 180). Such sentiments are echoed in the work of John Hobson, for whom Liberalism “appears as a fuller appreciation and realization of individual liberty contained in the provision of equal opportunities for self-development. But to this individual standpoint must be joined a just apprehension of the social, viz., the insistence that these claims or rights of self-development be adjusted to the sovereignty of social welfare” (Eccleshall 1986, p. 204). By acknowledging that human life is inherently social and meaningless when construed in isolation from its social context, New Liberals such as Hobson and Green laid the foundation for a more robust view of action by the state, whose obligations involve not mere non-interference with ostensibly natural rights but rather the creation of social and economic arrangements that allow for meaningful self-realization.

Perhaps the most emblematic figure in late-nineteenth-century British New Liberalism was L.T. Hobhouse, whose 1911 *Liberalism* became a classic of the genre. Initially a Gladstonian Liberal in the standard mold, Hobhouse was radicalized by his growing concern about economic inequities in Britain and their corrosive social effects. Sharply critical of atomized individualism, Hobhouse sought the expansion of state power so as to foster social cohesion and shared prosperity and opportunity. For Hobhouse, individual freedom is meaningfully possible only when the individual exists in a social context of mutual obligation and shared community, and society was “conceived as a whole which lives and flourishes by the harmonious growth

¹¹ It also reflected a repudiation of the model of a “market society” in nineteenth-century England and an acknowledgement of the “fictitious” commodities of land, labor, and money, described by Karl Polanyi (1944, esp. chs. 6 and 13–14).

of its parts, each of which in developing in its own lines and in accordance with its own nature tends on the whole to further the development of others.” Believing that “society can safely be founded on [the]self-directing power of personality [and] that it is only on this foundation that a true community can be built,” Hobhouse writes, “liberty then becomes not so much a right of the individual as a necessity of society.” In this context, “an individualism which ignores the social factor in wealth will deplete the national resources, deprive the community of its just share in the fruits of industry and so result in a one-sided and inequitable distribution of wealth” (Hobhouse 1942 [1911], pp. 123, 128, 136, 191). Anticipating the Lib-Labism of the pre-World-War-I period, Hobhouse viewed both traditional Marxist conceptions of class conflict and the radical individualism of Manchesterian Liberalism as corrosive. Much as Disraeli and Oakeshott (building on elements of Burke) had done for British conservatism, Hobhouse provided a clear articulation of an alternative liberalism, premised upon a conception of a coherent society of mutual obligation and mutual recognition, elements of which would be reconfigured and redeployed in the debates over Brexit.

The dilemmas of Brexit and the reconfiguration of British liberalism and conservatism

The tensions and overlap among these competing strands of British liberalism and conservatism provided a field of discourses that would be redeployed and reconfigured in the context of Brexit, intensifying dilemmas within both broad historical traditions and exhuming latent strands within them. Key moments in these developments reshaped how British voters understood the challenges of Brexit and the dilemmas that it implied. In this section, I bring forward the theoretical analysis developed above, emphasizing the shift away from individualistic, cosmopolitan, and market-rational themes to those championing visceral, organicist, and communal ones. I analyze key episodes in the Brexit debate, from the initial framing of the campaign, to the campaign itself, to the aftermath of the referendum and attempts to negotiate a politically viable exit from the EU. In each of these three contexts, I highlight the dilemmas within strands of the British liberal and conservative traditions and analyze how each has both reflected and helped to shape the debate and to create incommensurate understandings of the British political community in place of the gradualist consensus of the post-war era.

Cameron’s decision to call the Brexit referendum was designed to quiet the increasingly vocal Eurosceptical backbenchers in his party and to fend off the rising tide of support for Nigel Farage’s United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).¹² By the mid-2000s, most Tory MPs (outside of a shrinking pro-European minority) reflected “differing degrees of Euroscepticism,” leaving behind the party from

¹² Between 2006 and 2012, the share of working-class UKIP supporters grew by 7.6%, with the share of UKIP voters stating that they had voted for the Conservatives in previous elections at 29% in 2010–2011 (Ford and Goodwin, 2014, 124, 164, 166).

the 1980s and 1990s that reflected a “clear fault-line” between Euroscepticism and pro-European stances (Lynch 2012, pp. 85–86). Prior to the 2010 election, Cameron appeared to advance a form of “liberal conservatism” that appeared more Burkean than Thatcherite. This conception invoked social cohesion and solidarity along the lines of Disraeli’s “One-Nation Toryism,” though Cameron placed more emphasis upon personal responsibility. The apparent goal was to distance the Tories from their post-Thatcherite image as “the nasty party,” which was “out of touch, had failed to learn from its mistakes, cared more about the well-off than the have-nots, and did not stand for opportunity for all” (Lee 2011, pp. 9–10).

After the election led to a hung parliament and a coalition government between the Tories and Nick Clegg’s Liberal Democrats, however, Cameron quickly reverted to a strongly neoliberal posture, enacting a series of budgets that cut public spending and public services but couching the agenda in superficially communitarian terms. His post-election “Big Society” campaign was predicated upon the notion “that the state is inefficient as a service provider; that public expenditure inhibits wealth creation and creates dependency and we should instead turn to the market,” such that one observer struggled to “see even a sliver of space” between the platform and Thatcherism (Beresford 2011).¹³ Sharing with Osborne a commitment to fiscal austerity, Cameron worked to turn an ostensible necessity into a virtue, adopting a hardening anti-EU stance in the hopes of appealing to working-class voters disillusioned by New Labour’s soft communitarianism but repulsed by Farage’s vulgar parochialism. Although Cameron would always oppose Brexit and campaign, if tepidly, for Remain, he also reiterated the Tories’ opposition to the euro and pledged a “referendum lock” whereby any future treaty that ceded additional “significant” powers to the EU would be subject to a national referendum. This strategy of “negative integration,” defining the party and the country against the external enemy of the EU, was a longstanding Tory gambit, as we have seen. But Cameron’s ambivalence about Britain’s status in the EU undermined both his status as an advocate for Remain and the effectiveness of a political strategy designed to gain control of his increasingly restive backbenchers. In the words of one leader of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the main British employers’ association, “His heart is in the right place on Europe but his head is telling him to appease his backbenchers and chase UKIP” (Grice 2014). Cameron was playing a dangerous game, but “he thought that the risk was calculable” and viewed the referendum as a way to “take the wind out of the sails” of UKIP and neutralize the intractable Eurosceptics in his own party (Buchsteiner 2019).

Though Cameron had not yet made the turn to an anti-immigration position, he sought to reframe British society in more parochial and collectivist terms in ways that portrayed the EU, if sometimes only implicitly, as an external threat to British sovereignty. In so doing, he exacerbated the tensions between his party’s economic and social conceptions, while creating space for the emergence of a much

¹³ Announced in June 2010, the government’s emergency budget proposed a 25% cut in discretionary spending outside of health care and anti-poverty benefits, a 60% cut in public capital spending outlays, and an increase in the regressive VAT from 17.5% to 20%.

more parochial and visceral form of nationalism whose leading spokesman he could never reasonably hope to become. On the economic side, if less emphatically, the party continued to adhere to a more-or-less Thatcherite neoliberalism. This durable orthodoxy precluded the state action required to address the economic insecurity and alienation originating in post-1970s British deindustrialization and much exacerbated by thirty years of cuts to the public benefits and services needed to meet these challenges. With respect to its social vision, by contrast, the party's stance was discursively colored by a Burkean *cum* Disraelian collectivism that echoed elements of Hobhousean liberal socialism, though increasingly defined by a parochial fear of external "others." In terms of Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction, Cameron's Tories increasingly embraced a combination of "negative" freedom from both the EU and the state, creating a political space for a new, more visceral and organicist form of society and political community, connected to an opportunistic, discursively redistributive economic agenda with a narrower, and racially exclusionary, English-*cum*-British constituency.¹⁴

The campaign surrounding the 2016 referendum did nothing to alleviate these dilemmas, even as it exposed analogous tensions between competing strands of Liberalism within both the Conservative and Labour parties. With important exceptions, the battle lines corresponded roughly to the deepening divide between relatively educated, younger, and cosmopolitan voters, concentrated in London, the Southeast, and Scotland, favoring Remain, and less educated, working-class, racially homogeneous, and older voters concentrated in the North and Midlands. Supporters of Brexit were motivated by many things—nostalgia for lost empire and international hegemony, a sense of loss of an ethnically and culturally more homogeneous society, the quest to regain economic security in the wake of deindustrialization, a desire to restore a lost sense of national sovereignty and autonomy—but the common element of all of these desires was a yearning to reconstitute an organic community that the joint forces of internationalization, immigration, and economic decline were perceived to have destroyed. In this context, the desire to leave the EU was almost beside the point, with the EU playing the role of invader, resistance to various forms of which had been long been central to British political identity. The point for advocates, including notably Boris Johnson, Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab, and voluble Tory backbencher and Commons Leader Jacob Rees-Mogg, was that the recovery of lost sovereignty and the reconstitution of an alternative political community were inextricably connected aims. In Fintan O'Toole's words, "the fundamental contradiction of Brexit is that it wants to think of itself simultaneously as a reconstitution of empire and an anti-imperial national liberation movement." "The point," he argues, "is the act of unchaining oneself, and to be unchained it is necessary to have a master to be unchained *from*" (O'Toole 2018, pp. 80, 83, original italics).

For all their grievances about reconstituted empire and claims of oppression at the hands of Brussels, supporters of Brexit were bolstered more centrally by two other, more quotidian, political forces. The first was the growing alienation of

¹⁴ Boris Johnson's recent shift from orthodox austerity to a commitment to increasing spending echoes his commitment to bolster spending on the NHS in the run-up to the referendum.

working-class voters from New Labour, whose cosmopolitan individualism and Whiggish sense of inevitable progress left growing numbers of them alienated and politically homeless. Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin (2017, p. 18) capture this dynamic: “Between 1997 and 2010, under three successive Labour governments, socially conservative, working-class white voters with few educational qualifications gradually lost faith in Labour as a party that represented them and responded to their concerns. The result among these voters was lower turnout, falling identification with Labour, and growing disaffection with the political system.” Rather than work to attract these voters—say, with investment in job-creation or an expansion of income support—the Tories had responded to Labour’s individualism and cosmopolitanism with a version of their own, focused on standard Conservative narratives of economic individualism. This tactic left large numbers of erstwhile Labour voters—most of them white and many very uneasy with social liberalism and multiculturalism—unmoored and unable to identify with the liberal cosmopolitanism of either party (Ford and Goodwin 2017, p. 19), even as Tory-led austerity continued to exacerbate social and economic insecurity for many of them.¹⁵ This helped to create a “pessimistariat,” or “mainly male working class voters who are extremely pessimistic about the future and place little or no faith in mainstream parties and institutions,” available for mobilization in the service of a dream of restored dignity, prosperity, and sovereignty (Ford and Goodwin 2014, p. 190). Abandoned by both conventional liberalism (in the guise of New Labour) and conservatism (represented by the economically neoliberal Tories), such voters found themselves receptive to a Brexit campaign that promised to restore a sense of *Gemeinschaft* with a strategy of Wehlerian “negative integration.”

Brexiters’ second unwitting ally was the fecklessness of the Remain campaign itself, the result of a combination of complacency among its supporters and tensions among their various camps. Having promised the referendum, Cameron and members of his government blithely assumed that it would fail and that the hard-core advocates of Brexit would be neutralized, or at least weakened, as a result. Despite the deep wells of Euroscepticism within the Conservative Party, polling in early 2016 suggested that support for Remain was in a stable, if thin, majority. Such data, in combination with a relatively smug liberal cosmopolitanism among Remain advocates, led to a disorganized and uninspired campaign that focused mostly on the threat of lost jobs for the British economy, using bloodless claims about economic aggregates to counter Brexiters’ more visceral social and economic parochialism.¹⁶ Such negative appeals championed a pro-Europeanism that “became a proxy for the fusion of economic and social liberalism that had been a dominant philosophy of the political mainstream for a generation” (Behr 2016). The outcome was also a product of yearning among many voters for the recreation of a reconstituted “imagined

¹⁵ Since 2010, Conservative-led governments have implemented £40 billion in cuts to social benefits, leading to a rare rebuke from the United Nations. Since 2012, more than 600,000 children have fallen into “relative poverty,” and the use of food banks almost doubled between 2013 and 2017 (Mueller, 2019).

¹⁶ According to one cabinet minister, Cameron and Osborne believed that “it will be about jobs and the economy and it won’t even be close” (Behr, 2016).

community,” to borrow from Benedict Anderson (1991), even if its contours varied with partisan orientation. Even as the EU provided a useful foil for Brexiteers, and though the debate was ultimately less about the EU than about the character of British society, the hollowness of the European “Community,” and the sense among both Labour and Tory supporters that the EU was self-serving and remote, bolstered the rhetorical power of Brexit advocates’ appeals.

The combination of social liberalism shared by Tory and Labour elites, growing economic and cultural anxiety among white working-class voters, and the smug Whiggism of Remain advocates helped to create a political and conceptual space that would be filled with a reconfigured variant of British Conservatism—more parochial, more nativist and xenophobic, and more isolationist. Reimagined in this way, British “conservatism” came to be identified with nationalism, parochialism, and defensive territoriality, in the service of a new set of political constituencies: older, whiter, overwhelmingly English, less educated, and less cosmopolitan.¹⁷ At the same time, Brexit supporters claimed, this redrawn, narrower, and more exclusionary political community would confer economic benefits, not only in the form of restored employment but also in the repurposing of the British welfare state to support it. Seen from this vantage point, mendacious promises such as Johnson’s claim that Brexit would free up £350 million per week for the NHS made sense, less as policy commitments than as discursive appeals to a more visceral and parochial British nationalism, connected to anti-immigrant animus and informed by a yearning to secure Britain’s borders, thereby echoing Colley’s (2009 [1992]) analysis of the construction of British identity in the eighteenth century. This context helps us to understand, for example, Nigel Farage’s referendum-campaign billboard showing the UKIP leader against a backdrop of hundreds of streaming, vaguely non-white people, with the superimposed phrases “Breaking point: the EU has failed us all” and “We must break free of the EU and take control of our borders” (Guardian 2017), not merely as a racist, fear-mongering trope, but also as a clever reactivation of longstanding strands of British liberal and conservative thought. It is likely that many Brexit supporters did not actually believe that millions of pounds for the NHS would become available or that hordes of dark-skinned immigrants were swarming at the border, just as many supporters of Donald Trump in the United States likely did not expect the erection of an actual wall on the southern border.¹⁸ But on the

¹⁷ Clearly, many Brexit supporters did not share all or most of these characteristics. But the reimagining of British conservatism shifted its modal constituents, both in fact and in the imaginings of its advocates, in direction of these notional groups.

¹⁸ That said, politics can distort observers’ sense of reality in powerful ways. One retired banker to whom I spoke in autumn 2016 claimed that Brexit would allow Britain to defend its welfare state against rapacious immigrants, particularly from Europe but also those using the Continent as a temporary way station, a necessity given that “we [the British] have the best benefits.” The absurdity of this claim in no way saps the symbolic power of the idea. Here we hear a contemporary echo of Colley’s observations about early-nineteenth-century British narratives: “That many of [the] assumptions about French disadvantages and British benefits were wrong was immaterial. Britons clung to them so as to give themselves worth, and as a way of reassuring themselves, when times were hard, that they had drawn the long straw in life” (Colley, 2009 [1992], 376–377).

level of political theater, such appeals helped to give voice to very real social and economic anxieties, ignored or dismissed by many advocates of Remain.

Though the terms of the Brexit debate helped bring to the fore profound ideological tensions within the Tories, they posed perhaps even more daunting challenges to Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party. Having repudiated the cosmopolitanism and soft communitarianism of New Labour in favour of a hard-left, Marxisant platform, Labour was torn between the strong support for Remain among many of its more educated supporters and its traditional Scottish stronghold, and Corbyn's long-held sense that the EU functioned as an anti-worker cabal and champion of neoliberalism and economic austerity. Corbyn was thus constrained in his ability to defend Britain's EU membership, leading to a tepid, inconsistent, and half-hearted discourse that might have done more harm than good, providing a signal to many traditional Labour supporters that they had implicit permission to vote Leave, despite the Party's formal support for Remain. Another reason for Corbyn's ambivalence and political fecklessness in the referendum debate was the fact that *Gemeinschaft*-based conceptions sit awkwardly with traditional Marxist conceptions of class, which treat national allegiances as superficial. Brexit thus highlighted the awkward compromise between nationalism and class politics struck by Labour, whose shift away from the soft communitarianism of New Labour had left it with few politically viable strategies for navigating the Brexit debate. At the same time, it denuded British liberalism of politically effective, non-Marxist alternatives to neoliberalism, which had fueled the economic insecurity that helped lead to so many Labour voters' support for Brexit. What Brexit had done, then, is to imbue conservatism with a new Oakeshottian "moral language," colored by elements of Hobhousean liberal socialism, in the service of a powerful parochial, ethnically exclusionary, and irredentist-nationalist conception of British society.

If the discourse surrounding the campaign for Brexit highlighted these dilemmas of British liberalism and conservatism, the aftermath of the referendum has exposed both the dishonesty and intellectual bankruptcy of the elites leading the campaign and the feckless amateurism of significant segments of the British political class. Having promised an economically revitalized Britain, supported by a renewed sense of national identity and purpose in the world, leading Brexiteers soon realized that matters would be much harder and less economically auspicious than they had envisioned. Demonizing the EU was a useful mobilizational strategy, but it soon became a victim of its own success, exposing many of the misrepresentations and misconceptions on which it had been predicated. Having expected the campaign to fail, with Boris Johnson himself telling Cameron that the campaign would be "crushed" in the referendum (O'Toole 2018, p. 134), Brexit advocates were left to confront the fact that they had neither a detailed plan for how to execute Brexit nor a substantive conception of how to bridge the political divides within Parliament and British society. Britain found itself facing an outcome without a plan, leading the European Union president memorably—and with unaccustomed bluntness—to wonder "what that special place in hell looks like, for those who promoted Brexit, without even a sketch of a plan how to carry it out safely" (Peck 2019).

Although Brexit and its aftermath have led to a reconfiguration of British liberal and, particularly, conservative traditions, it has also exposed the thinness and

situational specificity of these reconceptualizations. With respect to the reorientation of conservatism along Burkean and Disraelian lines, it has turned out that the *Gemeinschaft* that Brexiteers claimed to seek and for which many of their supporters yearned is more myth than reality, perhaps by design. All along, it seems, the campaign was driven by nostalgia and drive for an unachievable ethnonationalist and neo-Imperial ideal, in resistance to the ostensible predations of European and immigrant “others,” rather than any meaningful attempt to address the economic and social grievances of many pro-Brexit voters. Animus, it turns out, is a poor basis for policy, and the political chaos of the past three years suggests that discourses surrounding Brexit have been much less about policy than of conflicts between worldviews that are ultimately incommensurate. Having promised that Britons could “have their cake and eat it,” Johnson and his pro-Brexit cabinet are struggling to maintain such fictions, with the abrupt departure of senior advisor and “hard Brexit” advocate Dominic Cummings reflecting the deepening cleavages within the government and the erosion of the façade of unity on the Brexit question (Payne and Parker 2020). That said, the mechanics of Britain’s exit from the EU are perhaps less interesting than how Brexit has reconfigured venerable British political constructs. The irony is that the very position that made such a quest politically successful in the short term—a strategy of “negative integration” and the demonization of the European “other”—has led to a probable outcome—a disorderly and perhaps economically destructive departure from the EU—that, in combination with the corrosive effects of decades of austerity, makes the promise of a revitalized British *Gemeinschaft* likely unachievable. With a record 58% disapproval rating from British voters for Johnson at the time of this writing in November 2020,¹⁹ driven by both the chaos surrounding Brexit and the government’s perceived incompetence at managing the COVID-19 pandemic, an imminent cabinet shakeup seems unlikely to reverse the Tories’ declining political fortunes, as the party finds itself tied in polls with Labour under the leadership of modernizer Keir Starmer (Savage 2020).

Conclusion: Brexit and the new parochialism

Discourses surrounding Britain’s relationship to the European Union over the past two decades have reflected and been informed by significant tensions within British liberalism and conservatism. Following David Cameron’s ill-fated decision to accede to a referendum on Britain’s EU membership, political conflicts increasingly became fights over the contours, character, and meaning of the British political community and competing lifeways, rather than debates about the costs and benefits of membership or exit, thus moving from the rational to the existential plane of politics. Advocates of Brexit have chosen an identarian field of political battle on which they have held the upper hand, reinforced in their convictions about Brexit by the feckless Remain campaign. By the time of the referendum itself, the two camps were

¹⁹ For the government’s approval ratings, continuously updated, see <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/boris-johnson-approval-rating>.

not only supportive of different policy positions, they were increasingly speaking different, and mutually incomprehensible, languages, reflective of different universes of meaning and incommensurate worldviews. This impression has only been reinforced in the intervening years.

This splintering of British politics in the run-up to Brexit and its aftermath, I have suggested, was both a reflection and a driver of the exhumation and political reactivation of dormant strands of British conservatism and liberalism and an only partially successful effort to create a new political synthesis among them. In place of the rationalistic and atomized visions of British politics and economy (in the form of both its Manchesterian liberal forbears and its more recent Thatcherite neoliberal incarnation), communal, identarian, and increasingly parochial appeals grew more prevalent and powerful. With respect to conservatism, this reconfiguration reflected the ascendancy of an amalgam of neo-Burkean conception of organic social order and the importance of tradition, a thin but rhetorically powerful neo-Disraelian “One-Nationism” aimed at the working and lower-middle classes, and an Oakeshottian conception of tradition as shared (albeit largely mythical) experience. This reorientation of British conservatism was also partially defined by an appeal to an anti-neoliberal form of British liberalism, reflected in the work of Hobson and Hobhouse, whereby social connections and mutual responsibility formed the basis of both a healthy society and the political consent on which the state’s responsibilities ultimately depend. This new, somewhat awkward synthesis increasingly took on a nativist (and decidedly *English*) hue, colored by a parochialism, xenophobia, and inwardly directed impetus that increasingly defined membership in the British political community as much by what it was not (e.g., European, non-white, urban, elite) as what it was. In this way, the Tories’ strategy of Eurosceptical, Wehlerian “negative integration” thus dovetailed with a nativist, and even quasi-autarkic appeal to a redrawn, and narrower, political community. In both the political and economic realms, debates about Brexit increasingly took on a strangely eighteenth-century character, with a zero-sum, neo-mercantilist conception of both domestic and international political and economic interchange facing off against a Ricardian view of mutual benefit and positive-sum relationships that struggled to make its case.

As Brexit has reconfigured and realigned strands of British liberalism and conservatism, it has also left discouraging lessons about the British political class. Surprised by the referendum’s result, Brexit advocates seemed to have only the vaguest idea of what negotiating its implementation would entail. Given that Brexit was pursued in no small part to further the political careers of its most ardent partisans, such figures bear significant culpability for an exit that will almost certainly undermine Britain’s economic, and perhaps geopolitical, interests over time. This context has placed in stark relief the amateurism of large segments of Britain’s traditional political class, products of elite public schools and Oxbridge and inculcated with the worldview of what Michael Moran (borrowing from David Marquand) has aptly termed “club government,” “whose members trusted each other to observe the spirit of club rules.” Traditionally, this meant dominance of the British economy and society by “bourgeois and aristocratic oligarchies,” sharing a class-based sense of entitlement and social prominence, coupled with a strong distrust of “practical” knowledge and technocratic economic management (prevalent, not coincidentally,

in continental, and particularly French, bureaucratic traditions). In the same vein, argues Moran, “the age of club rule was also necessarily an age of amateurism, incompetence, and stagnation” (Moran 2006, pp. 36–39). Though Moran argued in 2005 that the era of “club government” gave way to a transformative era of “high modernism” after the 1970s, Brexit suggests that such amateurism is alive and well, with one astute observer analogizing the process to the “malign incompetence” of Lord Mountbatten’s partition of India (Mishra 2019). Echoing Michael Gove’s dictum that “I think people in this country have had enough of experts,” such hostility to competence and technocracy makes a virtue of ignorance and a vice of knowledge and nuance. Given the likely economic repercussions of Brexit, to say nothing of the mounting damage to Britain’s international stature, Brexit has given such amateurism a newly destructive power. In this way, it calls to mind a variant of Marx’s famous dictum in “The Eighteenth Brumaire”: rather than occurring sequentially, tragedy and farce are now conjoined and mutually dependent components of a regrettable *dénouement* to British pre-eminence. Even as it has helped to redefine the character of and divisions of British liberalism and conservatism, then, Brexit has likewise resulted in a broad indictment of British political elites that carries with it discouraging implications for Britain’s future.

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