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## Explaining Brexit: The 5 A's - Anomie, Alienation, Austerity, Authoritarianism and Atavism

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# Explaining Brexit: The 5 A's - Anomie, Alienation, Austerity, Authoritarianism and Atavism

*Les 5 "A", ou comment comprendre le Brexit : anomie, aliénation, austérité,  
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## Introduction

- 1 Britain had never been an enthusiastic member of the EEC/European Union, due to its geo-political island status, its long history of independence, its former Empire and then Commonwealth, its role as a victor in WWs 1 and 2, its "special relationship" with the United States, the lack of enthusiasm by the two main political parties (Conservative and Labour) and disagreements within each of them, the operation and allocation of the EC Budget in the 1980s, and more generally, the British conception of indivisible (Hobbesian) "sovereignty", coupled with the concomitant preference for Intergovernmentalism over Supra-nationalism. When Britain did apply for EEC membership in 1961, 1967 and 1971, it was primarily for reasons of pragmatic economic advantage, not a principled commitment to political partnership and "ever closer union".<sup>1</sup> This "British exceptionalism" was widely viewed *in Britain* with a sense of pride and even a feeling of national superiority. Although these sentiments existed throughout British society, politically in the 1980s and 1990s, it was the Conservative Party which became increasingly Eurosceptic and nationalistic (while Labour became more pro-European), but also openly divided over Europe, as these divisions fatally undermined the premierships of both Margaret Thatcher and then John Major.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 The media also promoted Euro-scepticism, particularly Britain's predominantly Right-wing or pro-Conservative daily national newspapers – *The Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *The Sun*. Their reports on EU issues were often either sensationalist (the EU depicted as proposing to "ban" something for some petty bureaucratic reason), or

presented in confrontational, xenophobic or even in militaristic, terms; plucky little Britain and its “heroic” political leaders “battling” or “fighting” against dictatorial Brussels or a “tyrannical” European Commission. The discourse was frequently of “us” (Britain) and “them” (Europe); of adversaries engaged in a series of diplomatic conflicts and rows, rather than partners in a constructive and co-operative venture.<sup>3</sup>

- 3 However, prior to 2010, Britain’s membership of, and relationship with, the European Union was of low electoral salience; it was not an important issue to most voters in general elections. Although many people were unenthusiastic about Britain’s membership of the EU, it ranked low on most voters’ list of priorities, certainly in comparison to economic affairs, defence, (un)employment, education, the NHS, pensions, etc. In the 2010 general election, for example, when voters were asked (by professional polling companies) to identify the “most important” issue(s) to them, their family or Britain, the EU did not appear in the 16 most commonly cited issues, although immigration and asylum seekers were the 4<sup>th</sup> largest concern.<sup>4</sup> Yet after the 2010 general election, the political salience or significance of Britain’s membership of the EU increased significantly, as several factors and developments combined, resulting in the 52-48 vote to ‘Leave’ the EU in the 2016 Referendum – although as turnout was 72%, this meant that out of the total British electorate (actual and potential voters combined), 37% voted to Leave and 35% voted to Remain.
- 4 Of course, it could be argued that the narrow margin of the Referendum result exaggerated the scale of Euroscepticism in Britain, but what is significant for this paper is the *qualitative* aspect of the result, in terms of the attitudes and motives of many Leave voters, and the extent to which these revealed a Britain characterised by deep cultural, demographic, and social divisions. These divisions have shown no sign of healing or softening since 2016, but have become even more firmly entrenched and bitter, especially as the subsequent four-year delay in Britain formally leaving the EU was viewed by many Brexiters as part of a conspiracy by Remainers and the alleged liberal Establishment to ignore or overturn the Referendum result via repeated obstruction and obfuscation, and thus defy what Leave supporters deemed to be the democratically-expressed will of the people. Indeed, Britain is probably more culturally and socially divided today than it has been at any time in the last 100 years or more.

## The demographics of support for Brexit

- 5 Before we consider these aspects, it is essential to identify who supported Britain’s departure from the EU; among which sections of society was support for ‘Leave’ strongest? The demographic dimension of support for Brexit is clearly illustrated by Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Leave and Remain voters in the 2016 UK Referendum (%)<sup>5</sup>

	Voted ‘Leave’	Voted ‘Remain’
Age		
18-24	25	75

25-34	40	60
35-44	35	55
45-54	56	44
55-64	61	39
65-74	66	34
75+	63	37
<b>Sex/Gender</b>		
Male	55	45
Female	49	51
<b>Social class/employment status</b>		
AB (professional/managerial)	41	59
C1 (Middle class)	48	52
C2 (Skilled working-class)	62	38
DE (semi-skilled/unskilled)	64	36
Unemployed	60	40
Student	20	80
Retired	64	36
<b>Educational attainment</b>		
No qualifications	70	30
GSCE/Diploma/A-Level	44	56
Degree	32	68
<b>Party supported in 2015 election</b>		
Conservative	59	41
Labour	36	64
Liberal Democrat	31	69

- 6 Clearly, the support for Britain *leaving* the EU was strongest among three particular sections of British (or, rather English) society: older voters, the working-class (broadly defined in terms of less-skilled or manual work and/or lower earnings), and those with

a minimal formal education, features which have been confirmed by numerous other studies.<sup>6</sup> This educational aspect is a feature prevalent in both socio-demographic categories. In the 1950s, only 3% of the population attended university, both because the vast majority of industrial jobs did not require a degree, and because there was a patriarchal sexual division of labour, whereby women were generally expected to become wives and mothers, rather than attending university prior to pursuing their own careers. Certainly, for many middle-class women, *not* working in paid employment signified that they had married a man who was economically and financially successful, in terms of earning a salary which was high enough to provide a comfortable home and leisurely lifestyle for his wife; she was neither expected to work, nor needed to. For the vast majority of today's oldest citizens, there was little expectation or need to attend university.

- 7 Meanwhile, there is a clear correlation between social class and educational attainment; workers in “manual” or “unskilled” occupations are unlikely to have attended university – for most of them, a degree has not been viewed as necessary for their jobs. There has also been strong anti-intellectualism among much of the English working-class, which further fosters the view that a university education is unimportant, unnecessary, and over-valued. It is notable that, on Facebook, for example, many working-class Brexiters’ “bios” proudly declare “the School of Hard Knocks”, and “the University of Life”, and thereby signal their anti-intellectualism and belief that real-world empirical experience and physical strength are infinitely more valuable than academic qualifications or intellectual prowess. Incidentally, this antipathy towards academic ideas and political theory is one of the (many) reasons why the English working-class has never evinced any interest in Marxism.
- 8 Conversely, support for ‘Remaining’ in the EU was strongest among students and ex-graduates, younger people in general, and citizens in higher-status or better-paid jobs – many of which also require a university degree. Overall, then, how people voted in the 2016 EU referendum was closely correlated to their age, socio-economic class or occupation (and thus income), and level of education or qualifications attained.<sup>7</sup> This is not really surprising, because it is widely recognised that older voters and much of the working-class are generally more “conservative” and “nationalistic” than younger or middle-class citizens, who tend to be more socially “liberal” and “cosmopolitan”, in their views and values.

## Anomie

- 9 According to Emile Durkheim, *anomie* is a psychological condition whereby people feel a sense of moral or social loss or confusion due to extensive, or rapid, cultural and societal changes.<sup>8</sup> These changes, either in terms of their scale or speed, weaken social bonds and solidarity by undermining the shared norms and values which imbued people’s lives with a sense of meaning and purpose, and also shaped their roles and relationships *vis-a-vis* their fellow citizens. Therefore, *anomie* causes (some) citizens to feel morally or socially “lost” and bewildered by the changes around them: “*all that is solid melts into air. All that is scared is profaned.*”<sup>9</sup> The former certainties and codes of conduct which provided context and structure to human conduct and interactions are rendered obsolete, and superseded either by a state of flux, or the rapid imposition of a new morality which seems alien or incomprehensible to many older citizens.

- 10 Many of those who supported Leave have experienced a sense of *anomie* due to the scale of economic, socio-cultural and technological changes which they (and their communities) had experienced in recent years or decades. Certainly, the loss of regular employment caused by de-industrialisation, globalisation and new technology, and sometimes compounded by governmental policies, such as the closure of “uneconomic” coal mines in the 1980s and 1990s, played a major role in depriving many citizens of the social identity, status and pride which had previously been bestowed by paid employment, quite apart from the poverty that many suffered when their jobs ceased to exist.
- 11 This *anomie* was especially acute in communities where thousands of local citizens had been employed in a particular industry or major company, such as the local car-manufacturer, coal-mine, ship-builder, steel-manufacturer, or textile-mill, but which then closed-down, resulting in large-scale massive redundancies, a major increase in socio-economic deprivation and a widespread malaise or sense of despair. Without wages, local citizens’ spending power diminished, leading to many local businesses going bankrupt or moving elsewhere, whereupon the increasingly empty town centre and boarded-up shops both reflected and reinforced the sense of desolation and decay. Furthermore, not only did many of these citizens previously enjoy a sense of self-esteem and identity from their former occupation, they also often enjoyed a social status and prestige in their local community. All of this was lost when the jobs disappeared, thus reinforcing the sense of social, cultural and psychological “loss” which many local people experienced; a sense of being “bereft” and losing their former identity or importance in their community.
- 12 The impact of these changes on former industrial communities and predominantly older, less-educated, lower-income, citizens also led to them being characterised as “the left behind”, cast adrift and marooned by economic changes and technological advances which they were unable to keep pace with. Not only were newer, post-Fordist or service-sector jobs usually located in London, the southeast or England, or perhaps a couple of larger northern cities like Leeds and Manchester, they also often required educational qualifications, experience or skills which the “left behind” lacked. Again, this reinforced the *anomie* that many such citizens and communities experienced, and, in turn, fuelled a simmering resentment both of the economic changes which were occurring, and towards those who were either deemed responsible, or were the prime beneficiaries. This naturally reinforced the growing north-south divide in England, which was as much an emotional or psychological division as a regional one.
- 13 Furthermore, in some of these “left-behind” towns and communities, the *anomie* caused by the relatively rapid loss of employment and associated sense of social status or self-worth, was compounded by immigration, especially an influx of foreign workers post-2004, when some East European countries, such as Poland and Romania, joined the EU. Quite apart from the allegations or suspicion among some of the indigenous population that these migrant workers were either “taking our jobs” and thus exacerbating unemployment, or under-cutting wages, and thereby fuelling poverty, *anomie* was also increased by relatively recent arrival of people who spoke a different language, and perhaps had different values or lifestyles, to the local citizens who had been born in these communities. Some older, indigenous, citizens felt that their hometown had changed beyond recognition, often in a short period of time, and this

reinforced resentment against “outsiders”, and also against the “liberal” politicians who had allowed large-scale immigration.

- 14 Ultimately, the influx of EU migrant workers served to fuel *anomie*, because their presence in some previously close-knit or small-town communities further weakened the former *homogeneity* (shared social identity and values) and sense of organic solidarity which had previously existed, and instead introduced a degree of social pluralism and cultural or linguistic diversity which some of the indigenous population perceived to be threatening or unsettling; fear or suspicion of “the alien other”.
- 15 Certainly, immigration was a major factor in the Leave vote, with many supporters of Brexit citing it as *the* most important reason for supporting Britain’s exit from the EU.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, while many Leave voters cited ‘taking back control’ and ‘reclaiming sovereignty’ as key motives for supporting Brexit, an underlying impetus was “taking back control of Britain’s borders”, and thus having the “sovereignty” to control/stop immigration – via “the free movement of labour” – from the EU.<sup>11</sup>
- 16 Another manifestation of the *anomie* felt by many (older) Brexit voters concerned sexual politics, and the changes which had occurred since the 1990s – changes which also revealed a widening generational gap. For example, many older people had grown-up in an era in which same-sex relations were considered “deviant”, immoral and shameful, and until 1967, sexual acts between men were actually a criminal offence. Yet in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain, not only had same-sex marriage been legalised by a Conservative-dominated coalition government in 2013, and gay/lesbian couples were permitted to adopt children, but gays and lesbians proudly declared their sexual orientation, and had their own Gay Pride festivals. Many older citizens have found these changes bewildering, and often disapprove of such apparent decadence, immorality and “flaunting” of different sexual identities and lifestyles, having grown-up in an era when only heterosexual relationships were morally and socially acceptable, and sex itself was only supposed to occur within marriage, between a husband and wife.
- 17 Similarly, the recent development of an increasing number of (mainly young) people proudly defining themselves as bisexual, non-binary, polyamorous, sexually-fluid or transgender, and also rejecting gendered pronouns (she/her, he/his), has perplexed many older citizens who still possess conservative/traditional views about sexuality. As such, many older Brexiters view contemporary Britain as culturally and socially alien, as a new set of lifestyles and associated morals are adopted by many younger people which are very different to the modes of conduct which previously prevailed, and which supposedly helped to “make Britain great”.
- 18 A final aspect of the *anomie* experienced by many Brexiters is a sense of “victimhood”, a perception that they and their communities have suffered most from recent economic, social and technological changes, yet which they have had no control or influence over.<sup>12</sup> Instead, they consider these changes to have been imposed upon them without their consent, either by “liberal elites” who are themselves unaffected by them or their consequences, or by external forces, namely the EU and/or globalisation. In short, they perceive themselves to have been “left behind” and abandoned by mainstream politicians and policy-makers, and their views and voices ignored.
- 19 Indeed, many working-class Brexiters in “left behind” communities believe that they are now the only section of English society who can still be regularly denigrated and insulted (for example, accused of being “ignorant”, ill-informed or inherently “racist”)

with impunity, whereas other minorities – ethnic, racial or sexual – not only enjoy statutory protection from explicit abuse, hatred and discrimination, but are congratulated or lauded for their “difference” or being “unique”, and of being integral to a vibrant multicultural society. In this context, some working-class Brexiters view themselves as England’s last oppressed and victimised minority, but one which middle class “progressives” and social liberals do not consider worthy of respect or dignity, certainly not compared to racial and sexual minorities who are formally protected by “equality legislation” or classified as victims of “hate crime” when verbally or physically attacked.<sup>13</sup>

- 20 This sense of victimhood also manifests in a belief that “political correctness” or the “fascist Left” have prevented ordinary people from publicly expressing their views or anxieties, lest they be condemned as racist, sexist or homophobic, and “silenced” or lose their jobs via “cancel culture”. This is the context in which some Brexiters accuse Labour and the Left of betraying the working-class by embracing “identity politics” instead, and privileging ethnicity, gender, and sexual politics over social class. In turn, this working-class perception of victimhood and betrayal was ruthlessly exploited by Nigel Farage and his Brexit Party, and, in 2019, by Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party.

## Alienation

- 21 Closely linked to the *anomie* felt by many Brexiters was a feeling of alienation; a perception that the social and political system had become “alien” to them. Alienation among many Brexit supporters has been reflected in their contempt for “the political class” and distrust of “mainstream” politicians, as well as senior civil servants, a “lenient” judiciary and a supposedly Left-wing and anti-Brexit media – the BBC is often cited as an example of this alleged political bias (although liberals and the Left often accuse the BBC of being biased towards the Conservatives and of giving Nigel Farage too much airtime). It has been a common complaint among many Brexiters that “all politicians are corrupt”, “only in it for themselves” or “all as bad as each other”, a perception which was strongly reinforced by the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal, when several MPs were found to have fraudulently claimed money, ostensibly in connection with costs incurred in performing their political roles.<sup>14</sup>
- 22 However, EU membership compounded this cynical view of politicians because many Brexiters believed that MPs were unable – or unwilling – to prevent the European Commission from imposing policies on the British people, and in so doing, compound the loss of parliamentary sovereignty to the emerging EU “super-state”. To many Brexiters, Britain was increasingly governed from Brussels, rather than Westminster, and was therefore subject to rules and regulations (via EU Directives) drafted and implemented by unelected, and thus unaccountable, “Eurocrats” – the EU as a supranational institution imposing its policies on a subjugated British nation.
- 23 According to a prominent Eurosceptic Conservative MP and former Minister, John Redwood, the European Union has, since the 1990s, increasingly resembled a sovereign nation-state, with its own “capital” (Brussels), its own currency (the euro) and a central bank, its own defence policies (the Common Foreign and Security Policy), its own supreme court (the European Court of Justice), its own flag, and its own anthem.<sup>15</sup> This reinforced Brexiters’ perception that the EU was an “alien” geo-political entity, whose very existence, *modus operandi* and long-term strategic objectives were incompatible



with the continued existence of Britain as an independent, sovereign, nation-state, with its own culture, customs, history, political institutions and traditions.

- 24 Although alienation and cynicism towards politicians and/or the political system is relatively widespread, having increased among all sections of British society since the 1990s, it is undoubtedly strongest among citizens who are older, had only a minimal education, and who are “from poorer socio-economic backgrounds.”<sup>16</sup> After all, citizens with higher levels of education and/or higher-paid or higher-status occupations are generally likely to be more positive in their attitude towards the (political) system, or more confident of their ability to navigate it if they feel compelled to pursue a grievance or perceived injustice; for example, contacting their local MP, or perhaps submitting written evidence to a parliamentary select committee inquiry into a relevant topic.
- 25 One other aspect of political alienation apparently experienced by many Brexiters is the perception – strongly encouraged and reinforced by Brexit Party, and under Boris Johnson’s leadership, the Conservatives – that the Labour Party has abandoned the industrial working-class and the “left-behind”, and instead become a party pre-occupied with younger, socially-liberal, multi-cultural, pro-European, graduates and public-sector professionals, predominantly living and/or working in London, or in cosmopolitan cities like Brighton, Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester. This alleged abandonment of the working-class in favour of social liberalism and “identity politics” is also attributed to the fact that the membership of the Labour Party, both at grass-roots or mass-membership level and in the House of Commons, is predominantly middle class. The days when many Labour MPs had previously worked down coal mines, in heavy industry, or been senior trade union officials, are long gone (partly reflecting the more general deindustrialisation of Britain and its move to a post-Fordist economy), and most Labour MPs since the 1990s have been university graduates, and subsequently either entered politics immediately (perhaps working initially as a researcher for a Left-leaning think-tank or as a Special Adviser), or briefly pursued a prior career in the public sector, such as teaching, or the media.

## Authoritarianism

- 26 What has further fuelled the hostility of many Brexit supporters to relatively recent changes in England, such as the establishment of multi-culturalism and progressive social movements or lifestyles among the young, is a strong strand of authoritarianism often found among those who voted Leave in the June 2016 Referendum.<sup>17</sup> Although this trait can be found among individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, it tends to be particularly prevalent among working-class and lower middle-class or *petit bourgeois* sections of society, where economic hardship, material struggle and precarious or insecure living conditions often foster “hard” or intolerant attitudes, and a tendency to view issues, and life generally, in stark black and white terms; as a series of binary opposites – tough/weak, patriotic/traitor, normal/weird, one-of-us/outsider, hard-working/lazy, common-sense/ivory-tower intellectualism, hard-working/welfare scrounger, lock-up criminals/liberal do-gooders, etc. Citizens holding authoritarian views and values place a priority on conformity (to a narrow or rigid notion of what is “normal”) and thus view individualism and “alternative” lifestyles and identities (social or sexual) with contempt and derision – and possibly fear.

- 27 The “authoritarian personality” also often emanates from a home background in which there was little or no affection or display of emotions based on love, but instead, where there was a particularly strong emphasis on discipline and obedience (rather than discussion or explanation as to why something should be done), sometimes entailing acts (or at least threats) of physical punishment; what would be classified, outside the family home, as assault. In such families, showing affection or compassion is often considered to be a sign of psychological weakness, of being “soft”. However, authoritarian parents do not view these traits as a sign of cruelty or lack of love for their children, but as instilling in them the characteristics necessary to survive in a harsh, dog-eat-dog, world when they reach adulthood and leave home, and have to “fend for themselves”.<sup>18</sup>
- 28 This rigid and ultimately conservative outlook is often reinforced by a lack of further or higher education, which itself usually reflects and reinforces an anti-academic psyche, and an absence of intellectual curiosity or lack of interest in reading books. Not surprisingly, these features often foster a sceptical or contemptuous attitude towards students and intellectuals – “too clever for their own good”, and “heads full of big words and useless facts, but no practical skills”. It was these attitudes that leading Conservative Brexiter and Cabinet Minister, Michael Gove, was appealing to (and reflecting) when he claimed, during the 2016 Referendum campaign, that many British people “have had enough of experts”<sup>19</sup>. Authoritarians invariably demand action, not words – “Don’t discuss it, just do it” – and therefore idolise supposedly strong or charismatic political leaders like Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage or, in the United States, Donald Trump.
- 29 In general, most Brexiters are critical of, or hostile towards environmentalists (they particularly hate Greta Thunberg) and Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter (often deemed Marxist, or rejected with the claim that “All Lives Matter” – until asylum seekers fatally capsize in a dinghy in the English Channel), and feminism, which has recently acquired renewed prominence due to #MeToo, and the abduction, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a police officer. They have also condemned both the civil service and the House of Lords for allegedly delaying or diluting Brexit and thus defying “the democratic will of the people”, and regularly accuse the BBC of being Left-wing and thus broadcasting unpatriotic, anti-Brexit, propaganda.
- 30 This last claim also means that Brexiters have variously demanded the “sacking” (dismissal) of prominent BBC presenters who are known to oppose Brexit, such as Match of the Day presenter and former England footballer, Gary Lineker – claiming that their well-known political views (as expressed via social media such as Twitter) are incompatible with the BBC’s official obligation to be politically impartial. Similarly, the BBC wildlife presenter and environmental campaigner, Chris Packham, has been regularly targeted by Right-wing extremists, due primarily to his prominent opposition to fox-hunting and other forms of animal cruelty.
- 31 Brexiters’ criticism of the alleged bias of these key political and social institutions further reflects their conviction that Britain is dominated by a traitorous and unpatriotic liberal elite, whose views and values are diametrically opposed to those held by the “silent majority” of ordinary, hard-working, British people. This, in turn, was an integral aspect of the “populist” dimension of Brexit, and the discourse through which it was articulated.<sup>20</sup>

## Austerity

- 32 The anomie and alienation experienced by many Brexiters and their communities were exacerbated by the austerity programme pursued by the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat (coalition) Government. This Government's policies were dominated by austerity, as Ministers prioritised the reduction of the fiscal deficit and government debt in the wake of the 2008 global financial crash. This reduction was to be achieved mainly through cutting governmental expenditure on public services, social programmes, and welfare support.<sup>21</sup>
- 33 At the same time, the financial crash had already led to job losses and pay cuts or "freezes" in some private companies, and Ministers thus invoked a divide-and-rule discourse which decreed that as the wealth-creating and profit-generating private sector was suffering, the allegedly "bloated" and "heavily-subsided" public sector should suffer too – "*we're all in it together*", it was claimed, notwithstanding that while social programmes and welfare for the poorest and most vulnerable sections of British society were being cut, so too were the taxes paid by those on the highest salaries.
- 34 The post-2010 austerity programme implemented by the coalition Government was to become a significant factor in the result of the 2016 EU Referendum, because the cuts in public spending and services caused additional hardship in "left-behind" communities which already suffered heavily from socio-economic deprivation and poverty. Almost inevitably, this intensified resentment both towards European migrants, and the money which Britain contributed towards the EU's budget. In terms of further compounding resentment towards immigrants in some left-behind communities, the austerity programme fuelled an additional grievance, for whilst often being blamed for "taking jobs" from British workers or driving-down wages (due to a willingness to work for less pay, because this would still be more than they would earn in their home country), these migrants were also often blamed for the problems experienced by underfunded public services, in the guise of overcrowded school class-rooms, and longer waiting lists for NHS appointments and surgery, coupled with a shortage of "affordable" housing for local citizens on low incomes.
- 35 Even when there was acknowledgement that the demands and pressures on public services were a direct consequence of the Government's austerity policies and spending cuts, it was often argued that Britain should "look after its own [people]" by reducing, or removing completely, the right of "foreigners", via the EU's "free movement of people", to enjoy access to Britain's schools, health care system, and housing. As is so often the case, what was tacitly accepted or tolerated in an era of material abundance and prosperity became viewed as unacceptable or intolerable in a period of austerity and hardship, with the latter resulting in a hardening of attitudes, and thus a decline in tolerance, towards "outsiders".
- 36 The post-2010 austerity programme also fuelled anti-European sentiment with regard to the money which Britain contributed towards the EU's budget. This had been a long-standing grievance for Eurosceptics, with Margaret Thatcher, from start of her premiership, seeking a significant reduction in Britain's budgetary contributions; at a European Council meeting in Dublin in November 1979, she insisted that "*we want our money back*".<sup>22</sup> The dispute derived from the fact Britain contributed financially more than most other member-states, due mainly to Britain's higher rate of Value Added Tax (this having been raised from 8% to 15% in June 1979) but received relatively little back,

due to the fact that the majority of the EU's budget was allocated via the Common Agricultural Policy, from which Britain derived relatively little direct benefit. However, in making this a high-profile issue, Thatcher was also cultivating her own image as a strong, nationalist leader, and thereby seeking to impress a British audience. During the post-2010 period of austerity, Britain's budgetary contributions again became an issue of political controversy, as Eurosceptics asked why billions of pounds were being given to the EU each year while the British Government "needed" (austerity cuts were presented as an unavoidable economic necessity, rather than a conscious, ideologically-motivated, choice) to cut spending on essential public services like education and health care.

- 37 Again, the claim was made that "we should look after our own", as evinced by the message on the side of the Leave campaign's (in)famous bus: "*We send the EU £350 million a week; let's fund our NHS instead.*" Many people who voted Leave seem to have been strongly influenced by this particular message, and the sentiment it conveyed, namely that if Britain left the EU, billions of pounds more per year would instead be spent on health-care and other public services.
- 38 There was another way in which austerity contributed to the Leave campaign's victory in the 2016 Referendum. The main argument invoked by the Remain [in the EU] campaign was that if Britain left the EU, there would be serious economic consequences, in terms of less investment, fewer jobs and lower prosperity; the country would consequently be very much poorer. Yet such warnings were viewed with contempt by many Leave supporters, who accused the Remain campaign of promoting "Project Fear" and scare-mongering. Indeed, many Leave supporters argued that as their communities had already suffered long-term economic decline and a relentless loss of industries and jobs during recent decades – which EU membership had apparently done little or nothing to prevent or replace – they had nothing else to lose by voting to Leave the EU.

## Atavism

- 39 A cumulative consequence of the attitudes and *anomie* underpinning support for Brexit, and a key feature of the demographics which provided the strongest support for Leaving the EU, was a desire to "turn back the clock", to return to a perceived previous "Golden Age" such as the 1950s. Many Brexit supporters – especially the older ones – have a strong nostalgia for the past; they dislike or disapprove of many of the social and cultural changes which have occurred in recent decades, and believe that these have been detrimental to the "British way of life". For example, a 2016 survey found that 73% of those who voted Leave in the 2016 EU Referendum considered that, in the last 10 years, social changes had made Britain "a lot worse", and 76% of them believed that these changes had made life "a lot worse for me compared to other people".<sup>23</sup> Hence Brexiters' atavism manifests itself in a desire to return to a supposedly better, simpler, past; an era before EU membership, prior to mass immigration and multiculturalism, pre-Globalisation, pre-feminism, and when men and women supposedly had clearly-defined and universally-accepted socio-economic and gender roles, and simple sexual identities (i.e. heterosexual).
- 40 The *anomie* we discussed above has prompted a desire to restore former codes of social conduct, modes of moral behaviour, and community identity or localism. The revival of

these features, Brexiters assume, would restore people's lost social status and sense of self-worth, and renew the reciprocal bonds and mutual obligations which previously provided citizens with a sense shared of cohesion and communal solidarity. As one recent author has noted, among the sundry motives of many Brexiters were "a sense of loss of an ethnically and culturally more homogenous society [and] the quest to regain lost economic security in the wake of deindustrialisation", but ultimately, "the common element of ... these desires was a yearning to reconstitute an organic community that the joint forces of internationalisation, immigration and economic decline were perceived to have destroyed." As such, Brexit was strongly motivated by "parochialism and defensive territoriality".<sup>24</sup> These circumstances which yielded this hankering for the past had been identified five decades ago, by an American sociologist, Robert Nisbet, who noted that:

[W]hen men (sic) become separated, or feel themselves separated, from traditional institutions, there arises, along with the spectre of the lost individual, the spectre of lost authority. Fears and anxieties run over the intellectual landscape like masterless dogs. Inevitably in such circumstances, men's minds turn to the problem of authority.<sup>25</sup>

- 41 Although the grievances and desires of Brexiters can be viewed as an anti-modernist stance, it is more accurate to understand their perspective as an anti-post-modernist outlook, which rejects such contemporary phenomena as ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, sexual diversity or fluidity, social pluralism, and cultural relativism, along with present-day environmental or social justice campaigns, such as Black Lives Matter (anti-racism), Extinction Rebellion (climate change), and #MeToo (feminism). Many atavistic Brexiters condemn these values and campaigns as examples of "political correctness gone mad" and accuse those who promote these social movements of "virtue-signalling" or of being "Woke" – the latter term having been appropriated by the Right as an insult, or at least a means of discrediting and delegitimising campaigns for social justice.
- 42 The scale of atavistic attitudes among Brexiters was clearly revealed in a survey conducted at the time of the 2016 Referendum, when Leave and Remain voters were asked whether various contemporary developments had been good or bad for Britain or the British way of life. The results are displayed in Table 2:

Table 2: Leave voters who viewed particular developments or issues negatively vs Remain voters who viewed them positively (%)<sup>26</sup>

Development or issue	Leave voters - negative	Remain voters - positive
Multiculturalism	81	71
Immigration	80	79
Social Liberalism	80	68
Environmentalism	78	62
Feminism	74	60
Globalisation	69	62

- 43 Brexiter disapproval of these trends and social movements reinforces their aforementioned sense of victimhood, and the way their lifestyles and communities are being “left behind” and viewed (by the liberal elite) as obsolete or backward. In this regard, Brexit reflects a perception, and an anger, that “*a natural order of things ... is being eroded by feminism, multiculturalism, immigration, globalisation and Islam. Emotionally, Brexit is fuelled by anxiety*”, and a perception that, “*white men, rather than being ... relatively privileged, are in fact victims*” who are losing-out and superseded as women, and ethnic and sexual minorities demand equality and challenge white heteronormative patriarchy.<sup>27</sup>
- 44 Brexit atavism attributes these developments to two particular recent trends. First, the extent to which “social liberals” or Marxists – many Brexiters display considerable cognitive dissonance or confusion by conflating liberalism and Marxism – have apparently infiltrated and acquired control of key British cultural and political institutions, and sections of the media (most notably the BBC), such as the Church of England, the senior civil service, the judiciary, schools, and universities. Indeed, universities especially are widely or stereotypically viewed by the political Right and many Brexiters (who are unlikely to have attended university, unless we include the “university of life”) as bastions of Marxism and *inter alia* the radical Left-wing indoctrination of students, as supposedly proven by the much greater propensity for young people to vote Labour, Liberal Democrat or Green, to support progressive social movements like #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion, and, of course, support EU membership – not withstanding that the radical Left tends to view the EU as a “capitalist club” due mainly to its neo-liberal “competition agenda” and promotion of deregulation.
- 45 It is therefore often alleged or assumed that these institutions are being colonised by “politically correct” or “Woke” social liberals, Marxists, and feminists, to wage a “culture war” by silencing or “cancelling” anyone who is deemed to be homophobic, misogynistic, racist, sexist or transphobic. As many Brexiters hold Right-wing authoritarian and socially conservative views which are likely to be defined (by social liberals) as racist or sexist, this reinforces their sense of victimhood and oppression.
- 46 Second, Brexiters often attribute “political correctness” and “cancel culture” to some people being too easily offended by views or values which they disagree with, whereupon they seek to ban them, or censure the individuals who are expressing the “offensive” views. It is this stance which underpins the tendency to label young people and/or social liberals as “snow-flakes” who are mentally soft or emotionally weak, and thus too easily offended or upset when they hear “other” opinions and views.<sup>28</sup> This, in turn, of course, is another manifestation of the authoritarianism which characterises many Brexiters, for whom being “tough”, both individually and as a nation, is a virtue; if people are offended by homophobic, racist or sexist views or comments, then they are deemed to be the problem, not the person who is articulating the offensive remarks.
- 47 Another aspect of this Brexiter atavism and its yearning for the past, is a desire to revive local communities as a source of cohesion and identity. This, of course, is also a further example of many Brexiters’ rejection of European integration, Globalisation and multiculturalism, all of which are viewed as corrosive of both national and local identity. As noted above, these sentiments have produced a revival of English nationalism and nativism, but at the micro-level, this has also prompted a reassertion



of the importance of local “community”. The former Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister acknowledged this when she asserted, at the Conservative Party’s 2016 conference, that “*If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere*”, a rhetorical attack on supposedly social liberals and internationalists who rejected parochial insularity and reactionary nationalism.<sup>29</sup>

- 48 This supposed distinction was then explored by the commentator David Goodhart, who argued that Brexit had fully revealed the hitherto partly concealed “two tribes” of 21<sup>st</sup> Century British politics, the “Anywheres” and the “Somewheres”. The “Anywheres”, Goodhart explained, were citizens who tended to move away from the town or community where they were born and spent their childhood, to attend university and/or pursue a professional career, usually in London or even abroad. They are geographically mobile, socially liberal, and generally relaxed about socialising, having close friends or even intimate relationships, with people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>30</sup> The “Anywheres” embrace the “free movement of people” across national borders, and, indeed, the globe, and often proudly view themselves as “citizens of the world”. They thus have a positive attitude towards immigration, viewing it as a beneficial phenomenon which is culturally enriching. As such, the “Anywheres” are dismissive of, and disgusted by, what they perceive to be the narrow-minded attitudes, chauvinism, insularity and xenophobia often attributed to citizens living in small towns or rural communities – precisely the communities which were often the strongest supporters of Brexit.
- 49 In stark contrast, the “Somewheres” were defined as “more rooted” in their local community, where they might live and work throughout their whole lives; it is this which provides them with their social status and sense of cultural identity or “belonging”. They value socio-cultural continuity and stability, coupled with close-knit families (several generations of a family might live in close proximity, perhaps in the same street, and visit each other on an almost daily basis), and therefore often fear or resent major or rapid changes which cause insecurity and weaken community cohesion.<sup>31</sup> Such fear or resentment often underpinned their suspicion or hostility towards “outsiders” – invariably immigrants, but sometimes Londoners who buy “second homes” for occasional weekend-breaks or annual holidays– especially when the influx was on a large scale and/or occurred rapidly. In the case of immigrants, the scale or speed at which they arrive renders them highly visible, and means that they often became scapegoats for local problems, such as unemployment, low wages, longer NHS waiting lists, over-crowded school classrooms, shortages of housing, and increased crime or other anti-social behaviour. In this regard, the concerns of many Brexiters over immigration and its perceived impact on their communities, were both cultural and economic.<sup>32</sup> These concerns underpinned the yearning to return to the past, to a “Golden Age” when life was supposedly much simpler, and people enjoyed much more stability and therefore felt more secure.
- 50 One final aspect of Brexiter atavism is the Anglo-centrism of many Leave supporters, reflected in the development of an “English nationalism”. The alienation, *anomie* and authoritarianism discussed above have collectively and cumulatively contributed to a strong desire, among many Brexiters, to assert or re-assert “Englishness”, both in terms of political autonomy and authority, and in reviving the supposed values and virtues of an earlier epoch (pre-EU membership, pre-immigration, pre-multiculturalism), as discussed previously in this section.<sup>33</sup> Various surveys have

confirmed that when Brexit supporters were (or are) asked how they define themselves in terms of national identity, many more defined themselves as “English” rather than “British”, as indicated in Table 3. In effect, Brexit (in England) derives, in part, from “a rise in ... nativist political sentiment and identity”.<sup>34</sup>

Table 3: National identity and support for Leave/Remain in the UK's 2016 EU Referendum (%)<sup>35</sup>

Self-assigned national identity	Leave voters	Remain voters
English, not British	79	21
More English than British	66	34
Equally English and British	49	51
More British than English	37	63
British, not English	40	60

51 Politically, the English nationalism of many Brexiters has two dimensions. First, and most obviously, it is concerned to re-establish the dominance – sovereignty – of the Westminster Parliament *vis-à-vis* the European generally, and Brussels in particular. Hence the slogan “take back control”, which portrayed Brexit as an act of national liberation from foreign subjugation and supranationalism, thereupon restoring the supremacy (which had been surrendered in 1973) of the democratically-elected House of Commons as the sole or ultimate source of political authority in Britain; the British people and their institutions no longer subordinate to the EU.

52 In many respects, the trends we have identified in this paper have exacerbated, or made explicit, the latent xenophobia which has always existed among sections of English society, and although many commentators optimistically assumed that, during the 1990s and early 2000s, Britain was becoming a more socially liberal country, Brexit has given a new lease of life, and a sense of legitimacy, to those who dislike foreigners, immigrants and multiculturalism. That this latent hostility towards outsiders or “the alien other” is nothing new is confirmed by a 1941 observation by George Orwell, who ruefully noted that:

The famous 'insularity' and 'xenophobia' of the English is far stronger in the working class than in the bourgeoisie. In all countries the poor are more national than the rich, but the English working class are outstanding in their abhorrence of foreign habits. Even when they are obliged to live abroad for years, they refuse either to accustom themselves to foreign food or to learn foreign languages. Nearly every Englishman of working-class origin considers it effeminate to pronounce a foreign word correctly.<sup>36</sup>

53 The second dimension of English nationalism signified by Brexit is the drive to re-establish England's supposed dominance over Scotland and Wales.<sup>37</sup> In addition to resenting the loss of parliamentary sovereignty and national autonomy which EU membership entailed, many Brexiters also resent the diminution of England's authority and status apparently caused by Scottish and Welsh devolution in 1999. There were a European Parliament, a Scottish Parliament, a Welsh Assembly, and a Northern Ireland Assembly, but no English Parliament; England had, apparently, surrendered political



authority upwards to Brussels and downwards to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, and also contributed financially to the EU, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but had little effective voice in shaping policies or determining how the revenues were spent.

- 54 As such, having secured Britain's exit from the EU, many Brexiters now want to abolish the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament (or are thus opposed to allowing Scotland to hold another Independence referendum), and thereby reassert the sovereignty of Parliament (based in London). For example, in the 2021 Welsh Assembly elections, UKIP's manifesto pledged a referendum to seek its abolition, while a former leader of the Brexit Party in Wales, Mark Reckless, left to join the Abolish the [Welsh] Assembly Party.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election, UKIP called for the institution to be abolished, while Reform UK (which has succeeded the Brexit Party) emphatically opposes Scottish independence.<sup>39</sup> Although this is portrayed as strengthening "the Union", and preventing the disintegration of "Great Britain", it is, from the perspective of many Brexiters, ultimately about restoring the hegemony of England and the House of Commons (in which 533 of the 650 seats are based in England) over Scotland and Wales.

## Conclusion

- 55 Although many British citizens have never been enthusiastic about membership of the European Community/Union, they tolerated it primarily because of the supposed economic benefits. However, several trends and developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century prompted a surge in Euroscepticism among specific sections of British society, especially in northern England and South Wales. Pre-existing anxieties about long-term economic, cultural and social changes (not directly caused by the EU), which caused *anomie* among older, less educated and/or poorer citizens, were greatly intensified when EU expansion, in 2004 and 2007, led to an influx of migrant workers from Poland and Romania.
- 56 In the context of post-2008 *austerity* policies implemented by the 2010-2015 British government, these migrants were then often blamed for causing or exacerbating job losses and lower wages among indigenous workers, and adding to the pressures on underfunded public services like education health and housing. These migrants were also blamed by some people for changing the character of small towns and local communities, especially when seemingly large numbers arrived in a short period of time. This *anomie* then reinforced political *alienation*, as some local citizens blamed national politicians, and the EU itself, for permitting such immigration, and thus ignoring the anxieties and interests of local people.
- 57 In this context, three specific sections of British society became especially concerned about, and resentful of, these changes and developments in their communities, namely older citizens, the least-educated, and the lowest-paid (and sometimes with low-status). These were precisely the sections of British – or, rather, English – society which generally held *authoritarian* views and values, and who therefore bitterly opposed and resented the growth of social liberalism and "identity politics" in recent decades – particularly among younger and/or more educated people – as exemplified by immigration, multiculturalism, new modes of sexual politics (#MeToo feminism, same-sex marriage, "gender fluidity", non-binary sexual identities, polyamorous

relationships, etc), and new social movements like Black Lives Matter, and Extinction Rebellion.

- 58 Dislike and disapproval of these trends and changes, and anger at the material hardships caused or intensified by austerity, combined among those “left-behind” in many socio-economically deprived and decaying small-towns, to fuel a desire to “turn back the clock”, and return to, or recreate, a previous era; an imagined Golden Age. The 2016 vote to Leave the European Union symbolised these anxieties, and the anger felt by many (English) citizens about the ways in which Britain had changed in recent decades. There thus developed a belief that Leaving the EU would herald a renaissance of British/English greatness and independence, a revival of former glories, and somehow, a return to an epoch redolent of the 1950s, prior to the EU, prior to mass immigration, prior to multiculturalism, prior to same-sex marriage and gender fluidity, prior to identity politics, prior to “too many” people going to university to study “useless” degrees, and when men and women had clear, socially-sanctioned, gender roles and identities, while Britain still had an Empire or Commonwealth, and was a major world power.
- 59 However, the Brexiters’ yearning to return to this past is doomed to be disappointed; it is a chimera, a fantasy. Ironically, so many of the socio-economic changes that Brexiters regret or resent are a direct consequence of decades of neoliberalism and individualism promoted by Conservative politicians wedded to free-market economics, privatisation, and globalisation. In effect, many Brexiters are now looking for salvation from the very same politicians whose ideology and policies have caused so much damage to the “left-behind” communities and fuelled poverty. Unless the Conservatives abandon neoliberalism, they are going to be wholly incapable of satisfying the demands and expectations of those who expect Brexit to herald a return to the past, including a return to full employment, higher wages, cheaper housing and rising prosperity. When the Brexiters eventually realise that their expectations are not going to – and cannot – be satisfied (the clock simply cannot be turned-back 70 years), their anger at another “betrayal” by elected politicians might take Britain to an even darker, more dangerous, place politically.

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## ABSTRACTS

Although support for Britain's withdrawal in the 2016 Referendum emanated from all sections of society, it was much stronger and prevalent among specific socio-economic and demographic cohorts, namely older citizens, people who had received a minimal formal education in their youth, and those on low incomes. These were the citizens who had benefited the least, and whose communities had suffered the most, from four decades of deindustrialisation, globalisation, neoliberalism, and apparent neglect or abandonment by politicians in Westminster and the London-centric national media. Leave voters (Brexiters) were also notable for the extent to which they shared five social, cultural and political attitudes, characteristics or experiences, all beginning with the letter 'a': anomie, alienation, austerity, authoritarianism and atavism. Only by examining these five aspects can we fully comprehend the fears, frustrations, grievances and resentments which underpinned support for Leave in Britain's 2016 EU Referendum, and why these characteristics were very strongly concentrated in specific sections of British society.

Même si le soutien à la sortie du Royaume-Uni lors du référendum de 2016 émanait de toutes les sections de la société, il était beaucoup plus fort et prévalent au sein de cohortes socio-économiques et démographiques spécifiques, à savoir les citoyens plus âgés, les personnes ayant reçu une éducation formelle minimale dans leur jeunesse et les personnes à faibles revenus. Il s'agissait des citoyens qui avaient le moins bénéficié, et dont les communautés avaient le plus souffert, de quatre décennies de désindustrialisation, de mondialisation, de néolibéralisme et de négligence ou d'abandon apparent de la part des politiciens de Westminster et des médias nationaux focalisés sur Londres. Les électeurs en faveur du *Leave* (*Brexiters*) se sont également distingués par le fait qu'ils partageaient cinq attitudes, caractéristiques ou expériences sociales, culturelles et politiques, commençant toutes par la lettre « a » : anomie, aliénation, austérité, autoritarisme et atavisme. Ce n'est qu'en examinant ces cinq aspects que nous pouvons pleinement comprendre les craintes, les frustrations, les griefs et les ressentiments qui ont soutenu le soutien au *Leave* lors du référendum britannique sur l'UE de 2016, et pourquoi ces caractéristiques étaient très fortement concentrées dans des segments spécifiques de la société britannique.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Union européenne, Brexiters, relations internationales, mondialisation

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