Brexit and the "white working class"

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I.

Why, if the government is so weak, is the Tory vote still solid?

Despite the shock inflicted on Theresa May in June 2017, her party still polled over forty per cent of the vote. That was higher than the Tories had polled in any general election for twenty-five years. May lost seats while gaining votes. Labour's electoral recovery crushed the Tory lead, but not the Tory vote. Labour did well in spite of a popular Conservative Party. Even today, amid a crisis for the government, with the backbenches split and colleagues sharpening their knives against May, and no Brexit deal availing, the Tories poll close to forty per cent. What is keeping Conservative voters loyal? The same thing that is tearing the party apart from constituency branch to cabinet: Brexit.

The dog that didn't bark in the snap election was the so-called "Ukip effect". Dozens of seats in the Midlands and northern England, held by Labour for a long time, were tipped to turn blue. Since the Brexit vote in June 2016 and May's coronation the following month, the Conservatives had gone from polling in the low-to-mid-thirties, to consistently polling close to forty per cent. Much of that vote was made up of former Ukip supporters who, satisfied with the change in Tory policy, returned to the fold. In many of the rustbelt constituencies historically held by Labour, voting turnout had been drastically cut since 2001, Labour's vote share had been plummeting, and the combined vote of Tories and Ukippers was often more than fifty percent. It was enough for Labour to slightly improve turnout among its voters and win over some former Ukip voters, to blunt the Tory swing in most of these areas. Nonetheless, there was a clear swing to the Tories in these seats and, in some places, quite a large one. In other words, the "Ukip effect" did take place; it was just muted by the Corbyn surge.

There is a culpable tendency in the national media to portray such voting patterns as indicative of the passions of the "white working-class". This is tangled up with the same weave of misleading ideological assumptions that led to journalists talking up Ukip's "working-class" credentials. Nonetheless, it would be foolish to discount the psephological and anecdotal evidence of a revival of working-class Toryism since Brexit. By the same token, it would be complacent to overlook the disorienting effect the vote has had on Labour, despite its electoral revival. The party's 'constructive ambiguity' over Brexit, and particularly its wobbles on immigration, illustrate the fear that many Labour MPs have about losing votes if the party is perceived as 'soft'. This remains Labour's Achilles' heel. The roots of Tory revival, of the Brexit vote, and of Labour's related predicaments, lie in decades-old political outcomes.

II.

British politics today is a period drama. From a bird's eye view, it is striking just how much our national politics is warped around obsessions and injuries formed in the cool neon glare of the 1980s. From the stalemate over neoliberalism and the inability to curtail finance, to the panic over Jeremy Corbyn and his 'connections' to communism and the IRA, and the Tory revival-cum-meltdown

over Europe, we are still steeped in the residues of that decade.

One of Thatcher's major achievements was to delegitimise class politics. Class, she said, was a "communist concept". By inflicting a series of defeats on organised labour and incentivising competitive individualism in place of collectivism, she deprived the working-class of its industrial power. By promoting a new model of capitalist growth predicated on speculative booms and a property market based on home ownership, she accentuated the existing trend toward the stratification of the working-class. And by defeating the Left, she forced Labour to run against itself, stressing its distance from its working-class roots and its acceptance of the post-Thatcher settlement, thereby severely weakening the political representation of workers. All of this served to undermine the seeming obviousness of class. Culturally, there was no longer a single group of workers, such as car workers or miners, who could metonymically stand in for the whole: the big battalions of organised labour were wiped out. Even if a majority continued to identify as working-class, it no longer had the same effect as a political rallying point. Even if millions never assented to the new settlement, there was no viable political agency expressing that point of view. Tony Blair, in a major 1998 speech, signalled the new consensus in Westminster: the class war, as he put it, was over. This is not unrelated to New Labour's comfort with a form of modernising British nationalism: outward-looking, relaxed about its differences, competitive, open for business, sweeping out the Tory relics and impediments to meritocracy.

But the repressed always returns. Notwithstanding New Labour's anti-poverty social reforms, its acceptance of the engine driving class inequality contributed to a political landscape very clearly marked by it. It was impossible to ignore entirely, even if the most pervasive form of working-class protest during this time was non-voting. Instead, in the context of anti-immigrant backlash, it became de rigeur to bemoan the perceived injuries of the "white working-class". If, as Volosinov said, the word is the most sensitive index of social change, what do such locutions tell us? This was a period in which class politics was overtly ruled out of bounds. When Harriet Harman, as Minister for Equalities, flagged up a modest reference to class inequalities in a leaked speech, the breach with New Labour etiquette led to a furious press backlash. The class war, the papers reminded her, echoing Blair, was over. Yet the same media frequently covered the apparent difficulties of the "white working-class". The Telegraph, which had reproved Harman, claimed that "white working-class boys" were becoming an "underclass" due to their failure to go to University at the same rates as their ethnic minority counterparts.

The term "white" performed crucial ideological work. It allowed class experiences to be taken into account without evoking the militant and leftist cadences of "class politics". "White" workers were thought of, not as class combatants, but as conformist, sentimental, traditionalist, resentful and socially sadistic. They were identified with England flags, nostalgia, skinheads, sports tops, estuary accents, poor education and fear of outsiders. The danger of them falling into an "underclass" relative to non-white workers, was itself ideologically loaded. The "underclass" in the post-Thatcher vocabulary, was a moral category, bespeaking a lapse into welfare dependency, drug dependency, criminality and antisocial behaviour. The "underclass" was unproductive, lacked respectability and had no discipline. It did not engage in paid work, one of the few stable, negotiated sources of existence. It did not produce the kinds of families capable of instilling due regulation of sexual behaviour (teen pregnancy) and aggression (feral teens), and a properly submissive attitude to authority (disorder in the classroom). The bipartisan consensus was that the "white working-class" was in grave moral danger, linked to its failure to compete successfully with ethnic minorities and migrants.

This combination of pity and contempt for the "white working-class", losers in ethnic competition, foreshadowed today's solicitousness for the "left behinds". And it was cemented into a broad New Labour-inspired cultural battle, to define a coercive "Britishness" against the inherited multicultural

consensus. The cautious social liberalism of New Labour's first steps on racism, culminating in the McPherson report, had been abandoned by the turn of the Millennium. In its place, the government was locking up asylum seekers in detention centres, removing their benefits, and drafting new laws to restrict their numbers. The British National Party gloated about the legitimacy it gained as a Labour government played "the race card in far cruder terms than we would ever use". Following riots over police racism and the provocations of the far-right in northern towns, the government's official report scapegoated Asian minorities for failing to properly integrate. The policy response, linking immigration to 'integration', was turbo-charged in the subsequent context of a 'war on terror'-inspired crackdown on Muslims.

All of this drove the far-right's obsessions up the political agenda. The BNP was at first the major beneficiary, seeing its electoral support reach almost a million votes by 2009. It was not, contrary to a media commonplace at the time, a particularly working-class party. Indeed, BNP supporters and activists tended to look down on poor whites, who were 'almost as bad as' immigrants. But the BNP built support in working class areas by articulating class grievances as race grievances, and where they spoke of class it tended to be linked to ideas of authenticity and respectability. To be authentic was to be 'local', 'from here', while to be respectable was to adhere to traditional social mores. In other words, the fascist party exploited the resources of what had been a liberalresponse to the accumulating dysfunctions of a capitalist democracy.

In the same spaces, other far-right tributaries also grew: the English Democrats, UKIP, Veritas, the English Defence League. Had it not been for the credit crunch, the number one issue in the 2010 general election would have been immigration. In that circumstance, it's likely that the BNP would have won a seat, and even more than the half million votes they actually obtained.

III.

Labour's crash in the 2010 general election, with its lowest vote share since 1983 and the lowest membership figures since 1918, prompted a mild change of direction.

In a close leadership election, the soft left, union-backed contender Ed Miliband beat his Blairite brother for the prize. Miliband was clear that Labour's problem lay in the loss of working-class voters, some five million of whom had abandoned the party since 1997. He was also clear, at first, that the party had to oppose the government, and stop treating the unions like an unwanted stepchild. That meant refusing to support public sector austerity or the tripling of tuition fees. Labour needed to cautiously tilt to the Left, against the foot-dragging opposition of the still-powerful Blairite faction. There was even a moderate bump in the party's membership, as some hopeful activists re-joined. In the face of a coalition government of dubious legitimacy, led by Etonians and opposed by a coalition of working-class student activists and trade unionists, there seemed to be a place for some form of class politics.

Very shortly, however, there was a move within Labourism to head off this left-ward tilt. The student movement collapsed, while trade union industrial action, which Miliband declined to support, ground to a halt as the public sector unions negotiated cuts in pay and pensions. In the summer of 2011, the brief euphoria of the student revolt turned into a summer of riots, monstered by the press and ferociously dealt with by the courts. It reignited the language of race-panic, with David Starkey complaining that the whites had become black. At this point, Labour announced its acceptance of austerity, and returned to the Blairite mantra opposing 'welfare dependency'. A cluster of people close to Ed Miliband, including Maurice Glasman and Jon Cruddas, pitched a new political synthesis: Blue Labour. Labour would regain lost working-class support, not with public spending, but by appealing to the traditionalism, patriotism, family values, desire for lost community, and anti-immigrant feelings of the "white working-class".

However cliched its treatment of the "white working-class", and reactionary its conclusions, this analysis was based on some recognisable form of reality. The Left was weak, it had struggled to gain a hearing even amid the worst crisis of capitalism since the Thirties, and yet millions truly were enthralled by this strange abstraction we call a nation. It was obvious in the spectacles surrounding the Olympics, the jubilee celebrations, the royal wedding. British nationalism commanded broad appeal, including among parts of the Left for whom it was a harmless affiliation. It was most successful in the Danny Boyle idiom which produced and ironised and Hollywoodised national myth, one which carefully excised the historical reason for Britain's existence as a state, but which was digestible by those who might otherwise be put off by a 'biscuit tin' version of patriotism. It was precisely this sort of practical reality that led an earlier generation of intellectuals around Marxism Today, who were quite influential with Neil Kinnock and formative of New Labour, to argue for a leftist appropriation of nationalism. It was both inevitable and a valuable resource in the struggle for political hegemony: especially when confronted with a seemingly pervasively powerful Right, in what appeared to be an irretrievably reactionary country.

Labour scrambled to turn it into an electoral appeal. Ed Miliband evoked the 'English socialism' of William Morris and George Orwell, mined the cultural cachet of the imperialist Tory Benjamin Disraeli to launch 'One Nation Labour', and reassured voters that concern about immigration wasn't racist. The precipitous collapse of the extra-parliamentary left relieved any pressure to take a different approach.

Here was a political terrain custom-designed for a populist-right breakthrough. With a bipartisan consensus on austerity, the Tory and Labour leaders were competing to outdo one another on patriotism and immigration. David Cameron, to placate his rebellious backbenchers, was committing himself to impossible targets on immigration, while declaring the failure of multiculturalism. And, following the English riots of 2011, every major political development accelerated the right-ward drift in England and Wales: the bogus "Islamic plot" in Birmingham schools, panic over halal meat, the child grooming scandals in northern England, and a frenzy over the coming floods of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants. Even the Scottish independence referendum, while producing democratic upheaval in Scotland, compounded resentful English nationalism. With the Tory leader triangulating the nationalist forces that would eventually overturn him, and Labour on the defensive, the major beneficiary of these patriotic jitters was Ukip.

Until 2014, Ukip had been overwhelmingly a southern English, middle-class vehicle for ex-Tory voters. As the Tories had moved to the centre, Ukip developed a national policy agenda resembling that of the Tory hard-right. Its obsession with leaving Europe was minoritarian, but its hostility to immigration and Islam was not. And it was the English panic over immigration and Muslims which gave Ukip the means for a national breakthrough, gaining traction in Labour seats and local authorities. Ukip ran in these areas exploiting the same vein of discontent with Labour that the BNP had previously mined. Labour was out of touch with 'local' people. "How many more times are they going to let you down?", its billboards asked. "Labour doesn't care". To such 'antipolitical' populism, Ukip added BNP-style race panic, arguing in the wake of child grooming scandals that Labour had sacrificed the sexual innocence of white children on the altar of multiculturalism. In the rustbelts, Ukip didn't seriously threaten Labour, but they displaced clapped out local Conservatives as the main force of the Right. They took votes from Tories, the BNP, the English Democrats, the Liberals – often the main opposition to Labour in the north – and even some Labour votes

From then on, Ukip claimed to be the party of the abandoned "white working-class". It skilfully deployed a language of resentment over injustice, claiming that the difficulties faced by workers in the age of austerity could be blamed by migrants under-cutting wages and over-stressing public services. In this, they were abetted by journalists and academics, long acculturated to this colour-coding of class. In truth, Ukip had very little connection to the working class. Labour could claim to

be a working-class party based on its century-old affiliation with organised Labour, and its established electoral basis among workers. In organisational terms, Ukip was dominated by small businessmen and retired professionals. In electoral terms, it grew into a cross-class party whose share of support among unskilled workers was much lower than among managers, executives and owners of companies. But the narrative of "white working-class" betrayal had already been well-established by the political mainstream and by journalists from centre-left to hard-right. More importantly, Labour – demonstrating the extent to which it had internalised and institutionalised its own defeat – swallowed it. Ed Miliband pleaded with voters to believe him that Labour would be "tough" on immigrants. We were wrong, he said, to let so many in: we've changed. The pledge to toughen immigration controls was not only embossed on election mugs, but also made it onto the infamous 'Edstone'.

The 2015 general election, to this extent, was fought on Ukip's terms. Notwithstanding the efforts of Green, Plaid Cymru and SNP leaders to pressure Miliband from the left on austerity and Trident, the pressures to which Labour responded most sympathetically and vocally were those of anti-immigrant right-wingers. It, of course, did not work. While the Tories flipped former Lib Dem seats, completing the rinse-job on the Liberals that began with the signing of the coalition deal, Ukip surged with nearly four million votes. The combined Tory-UKIP vote in 2015 was well above fifty percent, and Labour's vote barely budged. Many Labour MPs, at this stage, were so convinced by the hypnotic power of nationalism and so unconvinced by the popular appeal of any distinctly left-wing idea, that they could only think their error was not to have been 'tougher' on immigration.

Meanwhile, David Cameron, no longer enjoying the alibi of coalition, had to fear his backbenchers. The last parliament had been the most rebellious in history, with anti-European Tory MPs routinely crossing sides to beat the government. He decided to settle the issue of Europe once and for all, as he had done with Scotland, with a referendum.

IV.

The capture of Labour's leadership by the Left was the first major test of the strategy of wooing the "left behinds" with anti-immigrant rhetoric. No one could be more off-putting to the "white working-class" of recent political fantasies than the radical socialist Jeremy Corbyn. He who celebrated his victory by attending a pro-refugee march, and whose life of activism aligned him with militant anti-racists. Surely the Oldham by-election, in a formerly industrial city where Nick Griffin of the BNP had once polled 16 per cent, would be a reality-check? No: Labour increased its share of the vote. In fact, the hallmark of Corbyn's leadership proved to be an astonishing electoral recovery among all working-class voters.

Nonetheless, the media remained convinced that Corbyn would be beaten on nationalist grounds. When large Labour cities like Sunderland voted Leave in the referendum on membership of the European Union, the media reported a crisis in Labour's relationship to its core voters – despite the fact that most Leave voters in these areas had previously voted Tory or UKIP. The Financial Times confidently declared that year that the new Ukip leader, Paul Nuttall, would give Jeremy Corbyn a run for his money among working-class voters, because he was a Liverpudlian with a "knack for talking to" workers. Labour, it said, must talk tough on immigration. Labour, once again, seemed to believe it. Even Corbyn, with his matchless anti-racist record, reversed his previous defence of free movement, insisting that Labour was not 'wedded' to it, and began to talk up the undercutting of wages by the 'importation' of cheap labour. Local election campaigns increasingly adopted the 'Blue Labour' style, from Gareth Snell's by-election campaign in Stoke to Sion Simons' mayoral campaign in Birmingham. The irony is that, while Snell gained a very narrow win against Ukip with this tactic in February 2017, only a few months later the Labour vote share shot up to 51.5 per cent amid a radical campaign with nary an England flag nor an immigration mug in sight. Simons, meanwhile,

was beaten after running with the Brexit slogan, 'Take Back Control'. Even on its own questionably premises, Labour nationalism seemed to go nowhere but to defeat.

Still, despite a breakthrough for the Left in the general election, Brexit clearly had made a big impact on the outcome. The mere fact that the Tories were still the biggest party, and able to cobble together a government, showed that something significant had happened. Even if the press focus on older white, working-class voters grumbling about Corbyn and the IRA had been exaggerated, such people clearly existed. There were also significant Tory swings in Leave-voting Labour constituencies. In seats across Tyne and Wear, Durham County, and Northumberland, the Tories generally raised their vote by around ten points, and sometimes more. In the East Midlands, the gains were even bigger, often around fifteen points. In Nottinghamshire, Mansfield, which had been strongly Labour since 1923, went Tory for the first time.

This was not, any more than the Brexit vote, delivered by a univocal "white working-class". The evidence of previous research suggests that susceptibility to resentful nationalism is driven, not so much by class position, as class trajectory: those who have lost ground over the last forty years, whether middle-class or working-class, have been more likely to blame migrants for their plight. And the evidence from the referendum and the general election is that the Right achieved a coalition of the downwardly-mobile class strata among both workers and the middle-class. Nonetheless, the growth of an energised working-class Right demonstrates the compensatory appeal of national revival, particularly for those who expect their position relative to migrants and ethnic minorities will now improve.

The workings of resentful nationalism in working-class constituencies can be seen by looking at how Mansfield, unlike Stoke, the so-called "Brexit capital of Britain", flipped. The fact that Mansfield is an historically Labour constituency, based on a now withered mining community, doesn't mean that it was historically left-wing. On the contrary, Mansfield was always a home to Labour 'moderates', and showed a strong vote for the centrist breakaway, the Social Democratic Party, in the 1980s. The fact that it is a mining constituency, doesn't mean it was ever militant. It was the home of the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, which organised strikebreaking during the miners' strike. This reflected the unevenness of pay and conditions across the industry, where Nottinghamshire mineworkers had historically been slightly better off than others, and were among the least militant. Most of them were cynical about rank-and-file militancy, opposed to Arthur Scargill's leadership of the NUM, and sceptical of his warnings that Thatcher was going to destroy the industry. They had never gone out on strike, and the local coalfields were a strategic pivot of the government's efforts to break the strike.

The destruction of the miners was ultimately Mansfield's tragedy. The local working-class was banking on the continuation of a postwar consensus, and a form of right-wing Labourism, that would be defeated by the same forces that broke the militant Left. The conclusion of that conflict allowed New Labour to rebuild its vote locally but, lacking an industrial policy to speak of, Labour couldn't prevent the continued erosion of local industries, with the brewery finally closing in 2008. The growth of unemployment and low-wage labour can be seen in the fact that almost a fifth of the population is on benefits of some kind, far higher than the national average. Nor is the 'knowledge economy' more than a slogan when the share of workers with no qualifications at all is also higher than the average, at 30 per cent. All that remains of the mining legacy is a slightly higher rate of home ownership than nationwide, thanks to the affordable terraced houses built for mining workers.

In many former mining towns, dissatisfaction with New Labour and the status quo was expressed in reasonable votes for Scargill's Socialist Labour Party. Nothing equivalent took place in Mansfield. There, Labour lost out to abstention, the small business-dominated 'independents', and then the far-right – with the Liberals remaining a strong 'protest' vote right until 2015. The 'independents' were

anti-Labour, anti-immigrant and anti-EU, so their support overlapped with that of the far-right. And because they were unable to turn local traction into parliamentary success, they stood down in 2015, allowing Ukip to monopolise right-of-Tory and 'protest' votes, taking 25 per cent of the total with little local campaigning. Voting patterns show how energised the nationalist-right was. Turnout had slumped since 2001, but saw a cautious recovery beginning in 2010 when right-wing parties entered the fray. The same pattern held in the Brexit referendum, with turnout much higher than it had been even the year before in the rustbelt Leave constituencies. Until the 'Corbyn bounce' in 2015, none of the increased turnout benefited Labour. Right-wing voters were motivated, excited by the anti-immigrant struggle, left-wing voters were demoralised. Such was the political valence of nationalism.

V.

Nationalist resentment has given ideological expression to real losses in the absence of an organised Left, and helped rebuild the Tory vote in places where it had been dying on its arse. It also made Ukip the most successful party in recent history, doing more than any other to get Britain out of the European Union, and transforming the Conservative Party in the process. Popular reaction, however fragile its electoral expression, is as real as popular radicalism. And it appeals to many workers, particularly older, less educated, downwardly-mobile workers in the rustbelts.

The problem for Theresa May, as she is already discovering, is that Brexit is a poisoned chalice. For as long as she is the 'Brexit' Prime Minister, she appears to be able to ride out her personal 'weakness', the disloyalty of her backbenches, and the splits in her party, without suffering significantly in the polls. But as the 2017 results showed, it is no good building support in working-class constituencies if you can't form a local plurality. Only in Mansfield did they succeed in doing so. So even if she can deliver a viable Brexit, and reap the credit for doing so, it might not be enough to put her over the top electorally. The only certain way to repeat Mansfield in other rustbelt constituencies is to adopt Labour economic and industrial policy, at which point they could kiss a lot of affluent southern seats already restless over Brexit, goodbye.

Brexit, and the nationalist politics that culminated in Brexit, has united people who probably can't stay united. Theresa May's nationalist discourse seeks, like most nationalisms, to touch all class bases. Britain must somehow be simultaneously UK Plc – open for business – but also protected from the strains of global competition, especially from migrants. It must encourage enterprise – strivers not skivers – but also discourage the 'excesses' of enterprise such as tax evasion and low pay. It must restore national sovereignty – British laws made by British voters – but also become a de facto EU rule-taker to avoid economic losses. It must protect property values but also sort out the insane housing system. It must keep taxes and regulations 'competitive', but also tax and regulate a little bit more.

It is not impossible to unify such diverse interests in a nationalist project, but there has to be some sort of minimal productive basis for it, and that isn't British capitalism in the early 21st century. There also has to be a minimum of political agreement, and that doesn't characterise the relationship between the middle-class Tory activist base, and the far more powerful business establishment. At some point, in this situation, something has to give. This unity is combustible. What gives, in what direction, and how dangerously, has yet to be decided. And will partly depend on whether Labour, entranced by the idea of the "white working-class", defaults once again to its traditional nationalism.

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