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Brexit and the Death of Centrist Liberalism

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Abstract
This paper makes the argument that Brexit is one of a series of challenges to centrist liberalism taking place across the core nation-states of the modern world-system. Offering a world-systems analysis on Brexit it draws upon two key themes from it to analyse the meaning of Brexit for the geocultural ideology which has dominated the modern world-system since the French revolution, what Wallerstein called centrist liberalism. First it situates Brexit in the longue durée regarding the manufacture of the United Kingdom and the development of its unifying national culture. The colonial and imperialist history of the United Kingdom are foundational to its national culture and have generated an uneven and increasingly contested support for popular imperialism. Brexit is, therefore, presented as a reaction to the abandonment of the social compact that underpinned British national culture over the course of the late C19 and C20, driven by the transformation of British political economy through powerful neoliberal policies. Second, whilst acknowledging the unique nature of Brexit, the paper situates the UK as a part of the core of the modern world-system to argue that the meaning of Brexit has to be situated in the context of the ongoing transformation of the political economy of the core since 1979-80, and the political responses that this has generated.

Keywords Centrist liberalism · Geoculture · Longue durée · World-system · Popular imperialism · Brexit

The paper sets out an analysis of the meaning of the Brexit vote by United Kingdom (UK) citizens in 2016 from a world-systems analysis perspective. It argues that Brexit represents a fundamental rejection of what world-systems scholars call *Cen-*

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trist Liberalism (Wallerstein, 2011). Drawing on world-systems analysis the paper makes two main arguments:

1. Brexit is part of a series of political transformations across the core of the world-system which has seen centrist liberalism successfully challenged and replaced by variants of *neoliberal* and/or a *clash of civilizations* geocultural framework. For *neoliberal's* centrist liberalism fails because it is based upon the idea of a social compact that regulates the market, extends the state into areas where it should not be, and consequently produces the social and economic problems which they see as being intrinsic to the UK model of political economy. By contrast the *clash* thesis rejects centrist liberalism because the latter claims to offer universal normative foundations to the organisation of social life and the international system. For proponents of the *clash* thesis the reality of political life is one of eternal struggles for power and resources by cultures whose values are incommensurable. On this view universal norms are simply an expression of power, not morality. In the core the emergence of these two narratives represents a fundamental challenge to and rejection of centrist liberalism.
2. The right-wing Brexit campaign was able to re-imagine themes of popular imperialism, which have long established roots in UK national culture and British identity. The two key arguments in support of the leave vote were both embedded in the campaign in ways that connected with specific manifestations of the Popular Imperialism (PI) legacy which were based upon assumptions of ethnonationalism: national sovereignty (or take back control), and hostility to foreigners. Both themes presented the UK as an island nation apart from Europe whose glory days were built as an independent colonial nation-state committed to free trade. The vote also revealed the limitations of a politics based upon these ideas, particularly amongst the young who appear to be increasingly immune to their appeal (Campanella & Dassù, 2019a, 2019b).

Britain was a key architect in the construction of the modern world-system and during the C19 was its hegemonic state. British national identity needs, therefore, to be understood in the *longue durée*, a central concept in world-systems analysis, in the context of a colonialism which was foundational to the construction of the British nation-state and in the manufacture of its unifying national culture. The roots of empire and its consequences for British national culture serve as the time-frame for this paper. The second advantage of a world-systems approach is that it situates Brexit in the context of ongoing systemic transformations taking place across the core of the world-system in the C21. Brexit is unique but also part of a wider pattern of challenges to centrist liberalism. Hence the *clash* thesis has been taken up by re-energised authoritarian political ideologies, most importantly ultranationalism and fascism, including the revival of ideas of biological racism (Coghill & Hayes, 2024).

The paper proceeds as follows: it begins by setting out the historic construction of British national identity, and with a particular focus upon the poplar imperialism thesis as a part of this; the second argument describes and explains the reasons behind UK membership of the then European Economic Community (EEC); the paper then

shows how Brexit is to be understood as part of a series of attacks upon centrist liberalism across the core nation-states of the modern world-system.

The British State and Nation in the Longue durée – from Empire To Empireland

This section will describe the origins and development of the British nation-state and the ways in which it built its national identity in the *longue durée*. Most states in the core of the world-system developed a unifying national culture which has been able to transcend often sharp regional and local conflicts within nation-states (Colley, 2005).[1] The significance of this cultural development for the creation of functioning nation-states cannot be underestimated. A unifying national culture has enabled states of the core to build a workforce, army, stable social order, and colonial empires through which to construct, dominate and organise the framework of the modern world-system. Following Colley, the construction of British national culture can only be fully understood in the context of its relations with Europe and its empire (Colley, 2005: 8). As Bhambra has argued, 'many European states were imperial states as much as they were national states – and often prior to or alongside becoming nation-states,' (Bhambra, 2014: 47).

The British empire and nation-state were an elite-driven project built on four major factors:

1. Occupation
   The first factor to consider is the expansion of the British colonial empire through the development of what has come to be known as settler colonialism (Wolfe, 1999, 2006). Settler colonialism refers to the ways in which the world's major European empires sent or forced populations to settle permanently in colonised countries with a view to taking over territory at the expense of the indigenous population. For the UK this meant establishing settler colonial rule over large sections of the world-system from North America to Oceania and parts of Africa (Horne, 2018; Howe, 2012).
2. Dispossession
   A common myth perpetuated by settler colonialism was that the colonised land was empty and therefore not possessed by anyone (Wolfe, 2006; Moufawad-Paul, 2013). This claim bought a capitalist logic to colonialism whereby land was seen as intrinsically private property rather than a shared commons for the indigenous population. Hence white British populations would claim title to lands in colonised countries, invariably seeking the best territory available (South Africa, Kenya) or taking the whole country (the USA, Canada).

[1] There are important exceptions here. Belgium has lacked a consistently unifying national culture in its post-colonial era. Italy has always been sharply divided between its northern industrial and southern agricultural regions.

3. Extermination.
   To further deepen settler colonialism and embed the British population in their new homeland an ideological framework was established through law, culture and religion that both justified British possession of the territory and the subjugation of the local population, initially as slaves or cheap/indentured labour (Wolfe, 2006; Elkins, 2022; Gott, 2022). In many instances this led to campaigns to eliminate the indigenous population altogether in genocidal forms of ethnic cleansing. As scholars have noted the genocidal nature of settler colonialism with its elimination of subject populations by British settlers was to prove especially influential in the development of fascism in the C20 (Fenelon, 2016; Lindqvist, 2021).
4. Accumulation
   Finally, the British colonial state was a predatory extractive state that sought to take wealth from its colonial territories to aid its own capitalist development (Colley, 2005: xiv). Thus, as Patnaik has recently argued, the British empire took around $45tn from India over the period 1765 to 1938 whilst at the same time destroying its manufacturing industry and preventing any subsequent industrial development (Patnaik, 2017; Hickel et al., 2022). Accumulation was to be based upon domination and the protection of British companies, often under license from the state and the monarchy, not on an idealised commitment to ideas of free trade (Dalrymple, 2019; Darwin, 2009; Koram, 2022). In practice the economic development and relationship between the British colonial state, economy and empire bears limited resemblance to any of the models of free trade that Adam Smith and others had developed in the C18. As John Darwin notes, 'the British empire was a fusion of public and private institutions' (Darwin, 2009: 145). Thus, the empire established a sense of national greatness and racial superiority, a quality that Gildea sees as intrinsic to the DNA of the British Empire (Gildea, 2019: 245; Sèbe, 2021; Bhambra, 2017: 93).

Building the British State: Uniting the Nation, Dividing the World

The United Kingdom was established through a series of conflicts (Cromwell's conquest of Ireland 1649-53, the Jacobite rising 1745, the Glorious Revolution 1688, Land Enclosures 1750–1830), Treaties (Acts of Union 1536 - Wales, 1707 - Scotland, 1801 - Ireland), Laws (Bill of Rights 1689) and social compromises that enabled a nascent bourgeoisie to ally with sections of the aristocracy to assert their newfound political power alongside their economic wealth (Sayer, 1992; Hodgson, 2017; Fry, 2012; Colley, 2005; Levine, 2019, Linebaugh, 2014). This compromise between aristocracy and bourgeoisie also generated a long-running conflict between *rentier* and *industrial* capitalism, which Cain and Hopkins described as the rise of 'gentlemanly capitalism' (Cain & Hopkins, 2016; Taylor, 1996: 161–165). Crucially the United Kingdom is best viewed as a manifestation of English colonialism, what Levine calls 'internal colonialism' (Levine, 2019). Wales, and particularly Ireland, were both incorporated into the UK through force and violence over a long period of time, while Scotland was incorporated into the UK through negotiations (Levine, 2019).

In Scotland the English ruling class made alliances with lowland Scottish aristocracy and merchants who played a clientelist role in the incorporation of Scotland into the union (Levine, 2019).

War and colonialism proved crucial to the development of the modern British state, leading to the establishment of the Bank of England in 1694 as a mechanism for funding these activities (Webster, 2009: 5; Goodhart et al., 2018). This newly emergent state structure began to assert itself through limited taxation and regulation of the domestic economy and overseas trade as well as protection for newly emerging capitalist industries. Thus, there were strong political and economic developments in the C16-C18 that saw the emergence of a new form of state structure in the UK taking shape, one that was predatory across the world-system, but which was also dynamic and innovative in science, technology and industry at home (Wallerstein, 2011: Chapter two; Tilly, 2017: 158–160; Mann, 1998: Chapter four; Jones, 2003; Giddens, 1985: Chapters six and seven).

British and European colonialism in general were marked by their use of massive and systematic violence against the colonised as a means of forcing open new markets and colonising territories. As Samuel Huntington, the author of the *Clash of Civilizations* thesis, noted, "the West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas, values, or religion… but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do" (1996: 93). By contrast, many powerful arguments situated in the *Great Divergence* literature have prioritised several qualities and factors internal to European culture and environment in explaining its emergence as the birthplace of capitalism and the nation-state, and its continued success (Jones, 2003). By contrast, world-systems scholars and others have noted that these domestic European pre-conditions for capitalism in the C16 could also be found in other parts of the world-system at the time (China, India, parts of Africa) (Goody, 2013; Blaut, 2000, 2012). The definitive distinction between Europe and these other areas of the world-system in the development of capitalism was to be colonialism and, as Huntington and Blaut argue, the use of massive violence to assert Europe's power and control in constructing the modern world-system.

By the mid-C19 Britain had become the hegemonic actor in the modern world-system and by this time the core collectively (the West) had been able to establish the rules, treaties, trade patterns, norms and laws that shaped the development of it, eventually incorporating post-colonial states in the C20 into positions of structural dependence and weakness (Wallerstein, 2015: 1). The framework of this system has evolved and transformed into the C21 though it has come under severe challenge as nation-states from the semi-periphery, most importantly China, have come to challenge the structure of the system (Winter, 2021).

But a unifying national culture could not be built on conquest and treaties alone and required the state to play a specific role in manufacturing a national identity that would manage the class divisions as well as the local and regional differences generated by the establishment of the UK as a unified capitalist nation-state. British national identity is described by Porter as an elite construction, manufactured for social control, and founded on national myths (Bouchard, 2013). Class conflict has been a persistent feature of British culture and in tension with the power of nationalism as a form of political identity, a recurring problem for the state (Griffiths, 2022;

Thompson, 2016: 6–7; Cannadine, 2000). To say that a national culture is manufactured is to make two specific points: first that it is the result of conscious activity by actors and the institutions that they control – in this case the modern state and the ruling classes (economic, political, administrative and military) that dominated its construction and administration. Over the period from the C17 to early C19 Britain's ruling classes feared their own populations as being a potential enemy within. It was during the Napoleonic wars that trust in the people amongst Britain's ruling classes was cemented (Colley, 2005: 284–291). War has proven to be a powerful factor in the construction of unifying national cultures across the core of the world-system (Colley, 2005: 4; Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991: Chapters four and five). Second, it is to make the argument that national cultures are manufactured by states using social mechanisms which have the power to change social life in terms of the beliefs, values and ideas that people hold about themselves and others. States in the core have much stronger institutions through which to promote this unifying national culture (Wallerstein, 2011).

However, the *dominant* state-led conception of British national identity was always under challenge from critical voices both within and outside the state. Nowhere was this more acutely felt than amongst the powerful working-class culture that emerged with the industrialisation of Britain, and which led to the construction of institutions reflective of this: trade unions, friendly societies, mutual aid societies, cooperative societies, self-help study groups and so on. As Thane has noted the development of these autonomous working-class institutions led some working-class communities to resist the rise of state welfare, health and education on the grounds that the state was an alien body, the preserve of the ruling class and which meant nothing to working class communities (Thane, 1984).

The British state also faced the difficulty of manufacturing a unifying national culture that would transcend the national differences between its constituent parts where anti-English resentment remained a powerful force in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. The national independence movements found in each of these nations played a persistent role in challenging the dominant English defined narrative of British identity (Nairn, 2021; Hechter, 2017; Langlands, 1999). Thus, the popular imperialism thesis cannot be read as a simply a process of successful socialisation of subordinate populations - British national identity was deeply contested and faced enduring contradictions between class, region, and national identity (Thompson, 2014: 214–245; Colley, 2005; Porter, 2004a, b; Beaven, 2017). What, then, were the most important mechanisms for the promotion of Popular Imperialism?

1. Colonialism
   Colonialism itself was the central part of the PI thesis as through it was constructed the idea of Britain's and the British people's natural racial superiority over their colonial subjects – they were rulers of the world and God's chosen country (Porter, 2004a, b: 45; Gildea, 2019: 168–180). This manifested itself in popular culture through literature, poetry, children's magazines and cinema as a way of telling a story about the British empire as a civilising mission to spread the rule of law and progress to inferior races (MacKenzie, 2017; Colley, 2005; Thompson, 2014; Beaven, 2017; Ward, 2001; Biggar, 2017).

2. Militarism
   Militarism has been a controversial part of British national culture as for a long period of time the armed forces and local militias were regarded with deep hostility and fear by the working classes and rural labourers (Russell, 2017; Edgerton, 2005). It took a conscious effort to change this popular view through the promotion of the military's heroic exploits in popular culture from the late C19 (MacKenzie, 1992, Ward, 2001; Beaven, 2017: 132; Griffiths, 2022). Military regiments were linked to specific parts of the UK by being identified with counties or nations, creating the idea of a unified military system and national culture (French, 2005). The exploits of the armed forces and its battles came to be celebrated in popular culture and instructed through state education, leading to the production of toys and games for children as well as popular literature and cinema depicting the white British armies fighting against the non-white barbarian peoples of the empire (Richards, 2017; Griffiths, 2022; Beaven, 2017). Veneration of the military has become an enduring and sacred part of British national culture and a powerful representation of masculinity (Kelly, 2013; Biggar, 2017, 2024; Mangan, 1995, 2014).

3. Education
   The public educational system which emerged in the late C19 was in part a reaction to the ways in which the British working class were organising their own educational, legal, social and health services as a form of mutual aid and self-help (Thane, 1984, 2016: Chapter two). This development of autonomous working-class activity and institution building deeply worried the ruling classes, and debates in parliament reflected this concern with calls from both conservative and liberal politicians for public welfare to replace these autonomous institutions lest the latter become mechanisms for radicalising the working classes further. For the state the establishment of public education was a means of disseminating educational instruction about British history and socialising the population into accepting British identity as being something above regional, local, or class identity. This educational socialisation promoted a civilisational world-view which saw the British as being at the summit of the Anglo-Saxon world (Thompson, 2014: 114–120; Beaven, 2017: Chapter five; McCrone, 1997; Edgerton, 2018). For Van der Linden, chauvinism and nationalism were implanted into society through conscious acts of state policy geared towards nation-building, with education the primary mechanism across the states of the core (Van der Linden, 2015: 117).

4. Religion
   As Rieger notes empires are powerful manipulators of religion to construct narratives that rationalise empire and unify the nation (Rieger, 2013). The protestant religion has been the most powerful institution unifying an often sharply divided British population, pitched as it was against a dangerous Catholic Europe. Anti-Catholicism was one thing that the Anglican church, Methodists, Presbyterians could all agree upon, and it manifested itself powerfully in popular culture well into the C21 (Colley, 2005: 23). This anti-Catholicism was expressed recently, for example, by Marxist commentator Paul Mason in 2020 who said in opposition to

the candidacy of Roman Catholic Rebecca-Long Bailey to be the leader of the Labour Party, 'I don't want Labour's policy on reproductive rights dictated by the Vatican' (Foster, 2020).

5. Mythology, Popular Culture and Ornamentalism
   Popular culture is a deeply contested part of the PI thesis in that whilst much evidence can be shown of the ways in which colonial and imperialist narratives were bound up in such things as music hall songs, cinema, radio shows, BBC broadcasts and magazines, it is also the case that popular culture has been a site of resistance to and satire of colonialism and empire (Chapman and Cull, 2009; Porter, 2004a, b, 2007; MacKenzie, 2017; Griffiths, 2022; Potter, 2012; Beaven, 2017; Ward, 2004; Wilkin, 2010). Popular events and sacred ceremonies were established to celebrate the empire and the military from Remembrance Day to Empire Day - events and holidays at which the public could pay their respects to the military, their leaders, and rulers whilst also celebrating colonial national achievements (Beaven, 2017: Chapter six). Every national culture has foundational myths, and the modern British nation was bound together through the construction of a series of myths about the unique qualities of an island race, often in resistance to European invaders, through to the long history of wars and monarchs which every schoolchild came to learn (Richards, 2017; Gildea, 2019; Griffiths, 2022). However, as Beaven notes, most of the British people gained their knowledge of empire from a popular culture that gave a seriously distorted picture of its reality (Beaven, 2017: 190–196). As Cannadine shows this extended into commercial institutions who recognised the money to be made from promoting the empire in popular culture and so *ornamentalism* became a popular hobby in the UK whereby people would collect mementos of the empire and British history to display in their homes (Cannadine, 2002; Sèbe, 2021).

6. Monarchy
   The final factor in the construction of a unifying national culture that generated the PI thesis was the monarchy itself. At the apex of the class system in the UK, the monarchy remains a hugely powerful and popular institution that is synonymous with empire, class and militarism (Randell-Moon, 2017; Carlton, 2014; Baker, 2020; Clancy, 2021; Olechnowicz, 2007). It remains a major landowner in the UK and across the world-system (Hall, 1992; Cahill, 2001; Christophers, 2017). It is the single most important institution in the construction of PI with its apotheosis being the installation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1876. The reverence for the monarchy in British popular culture remains a powerful factor in the C21 where the Queen herself was drawn into the Brexit campaign by tabloid newspapers who were keen to expose her alleged dislike of the EU and desire to see Britain leave it (Woodcock, 2016).

It is these mechanisms that created what Sanghera has called *Empireland*, a mythical, nostalgic, and often unifying national culture built upon colonial domination of the world-system (Sanghera, 2023; Spencer, 2022). Brexit illustrates the increasingly polarised and conflicted nature of British national cultural identity and its relation-

ship to the rest of the world, which as Gildea and Tharoor argue has been shaped by both insularity and a lack of awareness of the consequences of colonialism for the colonised (Gildea, 2019: 168; Tharoor, 2018: 7). I want to turn now to the second main argument underpinning this paper – the evolution and decline of the UK from hegemonic state in the modern world-system in the C20.

Two World Wars and One World Cup – Imperial Decline and European Unity

The concept of the *geoculture* which world-systems scholars have developed refers to the ideological framework that has come to dominate the modern world-system after the French Revolution. Wallerstein describes it as: "a set of ideas, values, and norms that were widely accepted throughout the system and that constrained social action thereafter" (Wallerstein, 2011: xvi). Over the course of the C19 and C20 ideas associated with centrist liberalism came to dominate the core states of the world-system, providing a body of ideas about the nature of modernity itself. The key assumptions underpinning centrist liberalism were the possibility of peaceful political change and the transfer of power between competing parties, the inevitability of progress, the necessity of social compromise as a means of resolving class conflict, the rule of law, the separation of church and state, the distinction between public and private, the separation of politics and economics, the interdependent nature of capitalism and representative democracy. Democracy, in its representative form, as Raymond Aron observed, was always a form of competitive oligarchy,

'It is true to say that in all societies it is a small minority which takes decisions. It is also true that in modern democracies oligarchy presents plutocratic characteristics; those who hold the means of production, the rich, the financiers, influence directly or indirectly those who direct public affairs... *It is impossible to conceive of a regime which is in one sense not oligarchic*. The very essence of politics is that decisions should be taken for and not by the community' (Aron, 1968: 83).

These ideas were challenged strongly from the socialist left and the far right over the course of the C19 and C20, but they were able to withstand them and absorb most conservative and socialist movements into accepting the legitimacy and permanence of centrist liberalism. This has been a major part of the centrist liberal geocultural framework of the modern world-system. The geoculture, then, is the realm of ideas which have helped to structure the modern world-system. Centrist liberalism emerged triumphant from two world wars and led to the construction of the European Economic Community in 1957 as a manifestation of this consensus amongst political elites in the core. The importance of this is that Brexit, in world-systems terms, represents a fundamental break with centrist liberalism and has seen the emergence of an uneasy alliance between the two geocultural narratives that came to replace it in the late C20: *neoliberalism* and the *clash of civilizations* thesis, both of which rejected the framework of centrist liberalism.

The consequences of two world wars in the first half of the C20 were catastrophic for British political economy. The accumulated debts owed to the USA left it in a position of permanent subordination to US power with debts being repaid well into the C21 (Ellison et al., 2019; Tooze, 2015). The UKs displacement from the position of hegemonic state in the modern world-system, a place contested by Germany and

the USA over the course of two world wars, meant that by 1945 the UK and Western Europe were dependent upon the US for finance, security and resources. The aftermath of WW2 was a period of immediate austerity and rationing for the UK population, a cost born overwhelBamingly by its working and middle classes (Kynaston, 2008). The payoff for Europe and the UK was that through the Marshall plan and NATO the US paid for post-war European security and reconstruction, enabling European governments to spend more money on a welfare system which would, in turn, act as an ideological counter to the potential lure of socialism or communism (Dorey, 2022; Hogan, 1987).

What became clear in the post-WW2 period was the long-term failure of the British model of political economy when compared with other European states. The UK lacked the publicly directed investment in industrial research and development that both France and Germany (and later the USA) endorsed, undermining its industrial base in favour of the interests of finance and rentier capital. Out of this came a post-war consensus amongst the major political parties which diagnosed the weakness of British political economy as being rooted in two interlocking problems: the need to modernise the management of manufacturing industry, and the need to direct investment into its research and development (Hammersley, 2015; Elbaum & Lazonick, 1984; Tomlinson, 2002; Tiratsoo & Tomlinson, 2005).

But the UK had long been dominated by rentier capitalism, and the development of industrial capitalism suffered because of this (Thompson, Taylor, 1996: 161–165; Webster, 2009: 8–11; Cain & Hopkins, 2016). Rentier capital in the form of banking and land ownership had been controlled largely by the aristocracy who were less interested in surrendering their power and wealth to the state to develop an industrial capitalist society, and more interested in using their monopolistic control of finance, land, colonies and property to advance their own interests (Cain and Hopkin, 2016; Wiener, 2004). C19 classical political economy argued that Finance capital acts as a drain on the productive economy in a parasitical fashion, about which John Stuart Mill observed, 'the large addition to the wealth of the country has gone neither to profits nor to wages, nor yet to the public at large [as consumers], but to swell a fund ever growing even while its proprietors sleep—the rent-roll of the owners of the soil…' (Mill, 1885: 519). Logically for industrial capitalism to succeed rentier capitalism had to be eliminated. This conflict between the interests of industrial and financial capital as models for British political economy was played out inconclusively over much of the C20 until it was decisively resolved in favour of finance by the Thatcher administrations from 1979.

The Postwar EEC and Nato System

There was, then, a cross-party consensus in this post-WW2 period which accepted the ideas of centrist liberalism, but which did so at the expense of finding a permanent solution to these twin problems of British political economy. It was, then, admission to the EEC that was seen by centrist liberal British politicians as a solution. There was no consensus upon this issue, however, and the criticism of the EEC in the 1950 s and

1960 s cut across Conservative and Labour parties and revolved around the issues of sovereignty and autonomy (Baker et al., 2008). Some Conservatives viewed the EEC as a quasi-socialist organisation that would crush free enterprise, whilst many socialists held the contrasting view that the EEC was a capitalist club that would prevent the possibility of a transition to socialism. How should we understand the origin and development of the EU from a world-systems perspective?

The EEC had been created as a solution to the post-WW2 problems of the European states of the core who faced social and economic ruin in the aftermath of their century's long conflicts. Its creation was with the full support and encouragement of the USA. The main geopolitical ambition of the then EEC was to tie France and West German economic development together so that they would not be drawn into future conflict over energy resources or for the general dominance of Europe (Böröcz, 2009: Chapter four). As a political experiment the EEC was to represent what Fraser has called a post-Westphalian project, which changes the conception of sovereignty that since Rousseau had been rooted in the idea of the nation-state and its sovereign people (Fraser, 2005; Kveinen, 2002; Kreuder-Sonnen & Zangl, 2015). Now sovereignty was to take on a new form, it was to be pooled between member states who would seek consensus and accept the constrained nature of their decision-making and autonomy in return for the advantages of membership of the EEC. This was to be a *functional* system within which major treaty revisions were to be driven by one of the EEC's pillars acting as an executive, the Commission, who would initiate the deepening (and widening) of the EEC over time (Böröcz, 2009: 5–6). As critics have noted this model of political organisation was to shift politics to a functional and technical level where fundamental questions about the nature of politics and a good society were assumed to be settled, regardless of whether the government of a member state was socialist, conservative or liberal in outlook (Heartfield, 2013; Kagarlitsky, 2017; Worth, 2017; Murray, 2020). Centrist liberalism was the ideological framework within which all these political parties could be accommodated. Centrist liberal sections of the UK political elites (social democrat, liberal and conservative) came to see the EEC as a means by which to address the twin structural and historic problems facing UK political economy. Access to the EEC could draw investment into the UK and force modernisation upon industry to compete in the European market.

Alongside the development of the EEC we must situate NATO, the military wing of US power in the post-WW2 Europe, which gave the US military bases across Western Europe and geopolitical control over Europe's defence and security (Böröcz, 2009: Chapters three and four; Forster & Wallace, 2001; Layne, 2013). These two organisations cover the range of post-WW2 European development and must be understood as two linked parts of the post war system. Allied to its economic and financial power this meant that the USA had profound military and political power to shape and influence the direction of post-war West European politics. US geocultural power took a variety of forms, from the promotion of transatlantic think-tanks and NGOs to training programs, cultural links and exchange programs for trade unionists, politicians, NGOs and armed forces (Ganser, 2005; Scott-Smith, 2003, 2008; Gill, 1991).

Class and Popular Culture: Challenging Imperial Britain

In the post WW2 period, the working classes across the UK gained power and autonomy through the creation of a variety of institutions which enabled them to build a vibrant, powerful and critical culture, as Rosen has noted (Thane, 2016: Chapter two; Rose, 2008; Rosen, 2003). Out of this emerged a critical revision of the history of the British empire, capitalism and challenges to the dominant institutions which had sustained it. Centrist liberalism and the deepening of the welfare state in the 1960 and 1970 s resulted in a more liberal educational system within which space was used by staff and students to ask questions about and criticise the formal history of the British empire and of the state itself. This was a liberal trend in education that Rosen argues was ultimately checked by the Thatcher governments in the 1980s (Jones, 2016; Rosen, 2003: 69). The consequences of post-WW2 migration into the UK also meant that there was gradual and important shift towards the uneven acceptance of a multicultural UK and the spread of anti-racist and anti-colonial sentiment, policies and movements, however much migrants remained subject to the problems of racism. The UK was undergoing a post-WW2 conflict over the meaning of its history and national culture, which in 2010 saw then education secretary and future leading right-wing Brexit campaigner, Michael Gove, intervene to respond to empire critics by saying that 'this trashing of our past has to stop' (Gildea, 2019: 219). The concern on the part of empire loyalists to defend a positive account of the empire has become increasingly difficult to sustain in the C21 as young people are increasingly critical of its history (YouGov, 2025). Brexit revealed an important division in UK political culture between the young, who were largely in favour of remain, and voters over 50, who were largely in favour of leaving (Beech & Lee, 2023: 74).

The 1970 s represented a high point for the British working class in terms of wage rises, progressive social policy, and their increasing influence into wider areas of British culture, economy and society (Black, 2012; Medhurst, 2014). At this stage if centrist liberalism were to be rejected the British establishment feared that it would be by a move to the radical left. The social tremors created by the 1968 world revolutions led to significant concern amongst transatlantic elites across the core of the world-system who were aiming to contain and rollback working class power (Gill, 1991). By 1975 elite transatlantic think-tanks such as the Trilateral Commission were publishing works that argued that these popular movements were a potential threat to democracy itself, understood in Aron's terms (as mentioned earlier), as an oligarchic system of competitive elites (Crozier et al., 1975). It was in the wake of these developments that the emergence of neoliberalism as a counterrevolution to leftist working class power and as an alternative to centrist liberalism emerged (Slobodian, 2018; Prasad, 2006).

Empireland and Neoliberalism: Laying the Foundations for Brexit

The immediate precursors to Brexit can be found in the succession of Conservative governments under Margaret Thatcher from 1979. These governments ushered in an era of neoliberal transformation of the UK which broke with centrist liberal-

ism and led, amongst other things, to the deindustrialisation of the UK (Marshall, 2013). The significance of this cannot be overstated in that many of the areas which were most strongly in favour of Brexit were former industrial towns whose working-class communities had been destroyed by the move to a rentier economy shaped by the interests of London-based financial institutions (Jennings et al., 2018). The key policies pursued by the Thatcher governments were to liberalise and deregulate markets whilst privatising public services, effectively making them private monopolies, which could subsequently charge exorbitant fees for access to essential services and resources (Gilmour, 1992; Carstensen & Matthias, 2018). Commitment to regional policy to protect the UKs unifying national culture was abandoned in favour of an ideological commitment to the belief that the market was the most efficient mechanism for addressing such questions. This shifted power into the hands of an ever more powerful and largely London and Southern-based rentier class who increasingly possessed monopoly control of public access to essential services and resources (Auer, 2017: 66; Martin et al., 2016; Martin, 1988; Christophers, 2023). In practice this represented a fundamental retreat by the state from the idea of having a central role in sustaining a unifying national culture through investment in public services, to one where control of all public services would shift into private and monopolistic control. Whilst privatisation was marketed to the public as representing a more efficient way to control resources that would lead to a reduction in the public tax bill, the reality was quite the opposite - privatisation simply shifted taxation from being a public and democratic relationship with the state, to a private and undemocratic relationship with monopolistic control of essential services by private capital (Christophers, 2020, Hudson, 2015).

These developments were taking place alongside broad political economic changes across the core of the world-system as the 1980s proved to be a decisive period in the transformation of the geoculture of the world-system. In the USA the Reagan administration pursued similar neoliberal policies and pushed for the expansion of liberalised global markets, particularly financial. The consequence of this was to be a massive shift of well-paid manufacturing jobs across the core to the periphery and semi-periphery of the world-system as companies sought the lowest costs of production in cheap wages (Wallerstein, 2000). In the UK this left behind working class communities destroyed by de-industrialisation with enduring rates of un- and under-employment and widespread social problems (Taylor-Gooby, 2017; Armstrong, 2018; Dorling, 2019a, b; Mack & Lansley, 2015; Mount, 2012).

Neoliberalism is best viewed, then, as a manifestation of a counterrevolutionary class conflict in the core, driven by a financial (rentier) class which rejected the social compact and compromises of centrist liberalism in favour of a form of social Darwinian capitalism (Hudson, 2015). The state's role was transformed from having responsibility for maintaining a unifying national culture and economy to one which promoted the interests of finance capital over industrial. This was to be a mixture of free market allied to an authoritarian state to control trade unions, civil dissent, and protest (Gamble, 1994). Crucially it placed control of the UK economy in the hands of finance capital, particularly the City of London, more firmly than ever before in the C20 (Howarth & Quaglia, 2017; Dörry, 2017; Norfield, 2016; Black, 2019; James et al., 2022). Thus, a more aggressive and socially indifferent form of political

economy could be ushered in which would valorise the luxury and wealth of the rich and famous in a global celebrity culture, akin to Veblen's *Conspicuous Consumption* (Veblen, 2005; Faucher, 2014; Patsiaouras, 2017).

The second geocultural challenge to centrist liberalism emerged in the 1990 s and in part as a reaction to neoliberalism. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis is the second challenge to centrist liberalism and is also important for an understanding of Brexit (Huntington, 1996). This idea argued that rather than the neoliberal view of the 'end of history' leading to the universal spread of liberal, capitalist, democracy and global peace, that the world was entering an era where ideological conflict would be replaced by the more enduring and long-term clash of cultures and civilizations. On this view the real causes of conflict in the world had always been between contrasting value and belief systems, underpinned by violent attempts at conquest between competing civilizations. Huntington's thesis proved to be immensely attractive to newly emerging nationalist and far right movements across the world-system who could embrace the idea of a *clash of civilizations* as a new form of ultranationalist conflict (Byshok, 2019; Stewart, 2020). More tellingly the far right and neofascist movements which began to emerge in the wake of the collapse of the global left in the 1990 s saw this as a story that confirmed their own prejudices about the West, Islam, race and immigration (Wollenberg, 2014). As Brexit illustrates, these two new geocultural narratives were not antithetical and could often overlap. Far right and neofascist Governments and movements embracing the *clash* thesis were often also keen promoters of the free market, which they saw as being a manifestation of the survival of the fittest civilization (Zaslove, 2004; Halperin, 2023). Witness the Meloni government in Italy and the Orbán administrations in Hungary who valorise national capitalism over global. The far right and neofascists have long sought alliances with major capitalists and conversely capitalists understandably preferred the far right and fascist movements to socialists as the latter might threaten their wealth, power and privilege (Paxton, 2005; Halperin, 2023).

The political transformation of the UK ushered in by the Thatcher governments and their successors celebrated a patriotic and imperial view of British history which drew upon many of the themes associated with popular imperialism (militarism, respect for authority, reverence for the monarchy, Britain's civilising mission in the world). It offered to working class communities an idea of popular capitalism and a shareholder's democracy, underpinned by access to cheap credit, so that they could take part in the consumer revolution that neoliberalism promoted (Reitan, 2003; Vinen, 2013; Gamble, 1994; Redwood, 2024; Jessop et al., 1990; Parker, 2013). The flip side of this has proven to be unpayable levels of household debt, the privatisation and the erosion of public services, and the dramatic increase in the cost of living for the working classes that has been a feature of UK political economy since the 1980 s (Mckenzie, 2017; Dorling et al., 2007; Lavery, 2018; Butler, 2023).

During this period the European Community became the European Union (1993) and began deepening its policy reach and widening its membership as a series of countries from the former Soviet Bloc were able to join it. At the same time the EU moved definitively in the direction of neoliberal reforms under the control of a European Central Bank and Commission that was itself dominated by German finance (Hermann, 2007). This imposed budgetary constraints on member governments and

gave the German and French governments the dominant role in the development of the EU. The organisation retained its functionalist and technocratic post-Westphalian structure. This meant that when referenda in France and Holland were held in 2005 on a proposed constitutional reform which was to drive the EU in a neoliberal direction, it produced two 'no' results, to which the EU responded by drafting the Lisbon Treaty. This was ratified by member states not referenda and was passed in 2009 and produced changes in line with those proposed in 2005 (Startin & Krouwel, 2013; Oppermann, 2013). The event illustrated that the euroscepticism in the UK was also apparent across the EU (George, 2000; Hobolt, 2014). This and other undemocratic actions taken by the EU institutions such as its attacks against Greece after 2008 were to prove to be powerful factors in mobilising and deepening anti-EU sentiment in the UK and elsewhere in the EU (Bell, 2003). As the EU moved away from the idea of *Social Europe* in favour of the neoliberal idea of *Economic Europe* British governments retained their distance and opted out of aspects of EU policy (Bailey, 2008; Giddens, 2013b). Most tellingly no British government was prepared to adopt the euro and even entrance to the exchange rate mechanism in 1990 proved to be a step too far for the financial markets which forced the UK government to withdraw from it. For the dominant financial and political institutions in UK political economy even a neoliberal EU dominated by a Franco-German partnership meant a potential limit as to how far any British government felt able to deepen its commitment to the EU. They were resistant to EU regulation of financial services which might lessen the appeal of London as a centre of global finance, particularly its criminal money-laundering activities (Burgis, 2021; Benquet & Bourgeron, 2022). I want to turn now to the consequence of these two arguments for understanding Brexit in world-systems terms as a rejection of centrist liberalism.

The Empire Bites Back: Brexit and the Clash of Civilisations

The financial crisis of 2008 which nearly destroyed the US and UK economies came as a direct result of the neoliberal deregulation of finance introduced by the Thatcher and Reagan governments and their successors (Lanchester, 2010); Hudson, 2015; Lambie, 2013). The consequences have been two-fold: austerity, social polarisation and a declining quality of life for the majority, and at the same time a huge transfer of resources to the very financial classes who had caused the crisis (through quantitative easing). As Thane notes in his study of the Britain since 1900 it as though the nation-state has gone full circle back to an age of war, inequality, poverty, and declining quality of life (Thane, 2018; Middleton, 2018). As many researchers have noted, the consequences of these policies over 40 years have been to increase inequality, poverty, social polarisation, and has led to a general erosion of trust in government to deliver the public services that people need (Thane, 2018; Dorling, 2016, 2019a, 2019b; Dorling et al., 2007). The anger and frustration created by the normalisation of these neoliberal policies left many working class communities with no political voice. It was into this void that the populist far right stepped to offer an analysis of what had gone wrong with Britain based on overt racism mixed with a contempt for progressive ideas (the dismissal of liberal values as 'cosmopolitan', a dismissal of expertise or intellectual culture - themes that resonated with classical fascism - and

an attack upon the EU as the embodiment of all of these things) (Sullivan, 2021; Zappettini, 2021: 4; Spickett-Jones and Niininen, 2023: 217–218; Khosravinik, 2017; Wodak, 2021; Burnett, 2017; Nisancioglu, 2020; Giddens, 2013a: Chapter four).

Anti-EU sentiment had long been a feature of British political culture after its accession to the union, but it had tended to be based in the socialist left wing of the Labour party and the right wing of the Conservatives (Baker et al., 2008). Whilst the mainstream of the Parliamentary Labour Party moved in the 1990s to accept neoliberalism and to marginalise its socialist left wing, the Conservative party was increasingly subject to the rhetoric and arguments of its anti-EU right wing who were very popular with its support base (Faucher-King & Le Galès, 2010; Jessop, 2007; Burton-Cartledge, 2021). The Bruges speech made by Margaret Thatcher is often viewed as a founding document for this anti-EU conservatism and as a cornerstone for the development of the right-wing Brexit campaign. The Bruges speech was an explicit reference to Britain's imperial history dressed in the guise of free trade and an independent nation-state (Daddow et al., 2019; Capezzone, 2025).

It was this anti-EU right wing of the Tory party that eventually led then Prime Minister David Cameron to propose a referendum on continued EU membership. In the context of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity it was giving great leverage to the right-wing Brexit movements who could turn the problems generated by the crisis into EU problems, rather than being ones generated by the financialization of British political economy (Crafts, 2019; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Rather than deflating these anti-EU movements the referendum added impetus to their actions and fuelled a mixture of emotions as captured in the statements by a Conservative Party member and prospective councillor outside the houses of Parliament in 2019 who declared in popular imperialist manner:

'We voted for freedom, not for money. We didn't say we wanted to be richer or poorer. We voted for freedom… I am willing to die for the vote. If they don't leave on the 30 March, there's thousands like me up and down the country that is willing to stand their ground. We lost 7 million British, Commonwealth and Americans fighting for this country to be free. We are not handing it over to the Europeans, that's for sure,' (Wheeler, 2019).

As noted, the consequences of neoliberal reforms in the UK had been to create a divided country, socially polarised, and within which power had shifted increasingly to financial industries and their interests. The deindustrialisation of large parts of the UK in the 1980s and 1990s served to destroy many working-class communities and crucially, the organisations that they had built over the C19 and C20 to promote their own interests and which promoted largely progressive ideas and values (Tomlinson & Dorling, 2016). The consequences of this were to create communities that were demoralised and disempowered with high rates of un- and under-employment, higher levels of poverty, and debt. In many of these towns there was a strong vote for Brexit (Gildea, 2019: 236). No mainstream political party sought to address these social and economic problems in a significant way after the 1980s as all remained committed to the sovereignty of the market over the nation and the state. As the *Financial Times* noted in 2022, the UK (and the USA) are now poor societies dominated by very rich people (Burn-Murdoch, 2022). It is hardly surprising that in this context sections of the working and middle class decided to support Brexit as one solution to their problems.

This is particularly the case when one considers the high degree of propaganda and outright lying conducted by the right-wing Brexit campaign and its mainstream and social media supporters who sought to make the case that the EU was indeed the prime cause of Britain's problems (Zečić-Durmišević, 2020; Durmis Menon & Wager, 2020; Smith, 2019; Agnew, 2020). As Marshall and Drieschova note social media was a particularly powerful and mendacious tool in the leave campaign (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018).

Constitutional changes from the 1990 s onwards towards decentralisation (devolution) by the State appears to have done little to revive Britishness as a form of national identity with even the English now identifying more with Englishness as a form of national identity (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2013, 2017a, b; Ward, 2004; Colley, 1992; Langlands, 1999; Gifford, 2010; Webster, 2007; Sandford & Gormley-Heenan, 2020). As the Brexit vote has revealed it is a re-energised English nationalism that has mainly driven the campaign to leave the EU (Webster, 2007; Gillespie, 2020; Black, 2018; Wellings, 2010; Henderson et al., 2017).

By contrast, the left-wing exit (LEXIT) campaign offered a socialist alternative to right-wing Brexit and its alliance of free trade and nationalism. Lexit argued that only by leaving the EU could Britain pursue a socialist model of development (Murray, 2020; Varoufakis, 2021; Ypi, 2018). But Lexit suffered from several problems not the least of which being that it could count on little support from either the media or the wealthy financial backers that a modern political campaign requires (Guinan & Hanna, 2017). The financialization of democracy itself has made it much harder for anti-capitalist and critical voices to mobilise support and secure elected office. Further, Britain's working classes have lost the cultural institutions which had made them such a powerful force in the post WW2 period, swept away by the neoliberal counterrevolution (Rosen, 2003: Chapter six; McGuigan, 2016). It was extremely difficult for Lexit to make its case in a popular culture overwhelmingly dominated by media institutions owned by right-wing male capitalists who understandably view socialism as a threat to their interests (Guinan & Hanna, 2017). In contrast with the right-wing Brexit campaign, which was funded by domestic and global capital, Lexit struggled to be heard. By contrast, for sections of global financial capital Brexit was attractive because it opened the possibility for further privatisation of Britain's public sector, must importantly the NHS (Benquet & Bourgeron, 2022). By comparison, Lexit represented the wrong class interests. So, it needs to be stressed that there was both a Socialist case for Brexit and a right-wing free trade/nationalist case.

Thus, support for Brexit cannot be read as simply xenophobic, as some have tried to argue. Though racism played a part in the right-wing Brexit campaign and appealed to sections of the British population it is clearly a more complicated matter than this (Birks, 2021; Breazu & McGarry, 2023; Rzepnikowska, 2019). Equally nostalgia for empire (part of the PI thesis) could be found in both leave and remain camps (Saunders, 2020). The referendum vote in the United Kingdom in 2016 to leave the European Union (EU) was an expression of complex social divisions in British political and popular culture (Telford & Wistow, 2020). As analysts have subsequently noted these can be measured in terms of the following: class, age, education, employment, urban and rural, ethnicity, values (authoritarian vs. libertarian), spatially (the south-east had the highest leave vote), and political ideology. In addition, it is important to note that 13 million registered voters cast no vote at all (Clarke et al., 2017; Norris &

Inglehart, 2019; Carreras, 2019; Dowling, 2021; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020; Dorling, 2016, 2019a). During the campaign neither of the two main political parties could offer a unified position on the issue of EU membership - neither has been able to since the UK first joined the then European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. But the consequences of Brexit, whether it had been shaped by the left or the right, are undoubtedly an attack on centrist liberalism. But how was this attack constructed?

Following in the wake of populist movements which had begun to impact political culture across the core nation-states in the 1990 s we can separate the right-wing Brexit campaign into two strands:

1. Right-wing nationalism.
2. Free traders.

The two right-wings of the Brexit campaign drew, in part, upon enduring PI themes to make their arguments, though Porter, unlike Dorling, argues that such examples were limited (Porter, 2004a, b: 32; Dorling, 2019a; Ward & Rasch, 2019). For right-wing nationalists, the narrative was built around the idea that the British nation was being undermined by immigration shaped by EU policy. This had already led to a failed multicultural Britain which for the proponents of right-wing Brexit opened the door to terrorists, subversives, sexual predators, and worse. The traditional British nation, white and patriotic, had been failed by its domestic and EU political elites on the altar of abstract and cosmopolitan ideas and liberal values which served only to undermine a traditional British way of life (Tournier-Sol, 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Birks, 2021: 14). Both Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, the twin-heads of the right-wing Brexit campaign, made great play of these kind of ideas, added to outright falsification about the benefits for the public of leaving the EU (Oborne, 2021; Gaber & Fisher, 2022; Berend, I, 2020). By contrast, for the free trade section of right-wing Brexit, the argument was that the EU was holding back the UK from economic success by its bureaucratic regulation of the economy (Outhwaite, 2017; Iakhnis et al., 2018; Prentoulis et al., 2017; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2017). For the right-wing free traders if the UK were to leave the EU it would become a free trade nation as it had been in its heyday in the C19, the Singapore of Europe, able to form free trade partnerships with whomever it wished.

The ultimate message from the right-wing Brexit campaign was one of taking back control. This powerful theme about sovereignty connected support from the right and the left in UK politics, but in practice it is not entirely clear what it meant. As critics have pointed out, for right-wing Brexiteers it was a message mixed with the racist theme of 'we want our country back' – to free the white patriotic UK citizens from the dangers of migration (Bhambra, 2017: 91). However, Brexit does not place control of the UK in the hands of its citizens. Land ownership in the UK is overwhelmingly in private and often foreign hands (Meek, 2014; Christophers, 2017; Cahill, 2001). Likewise public services that have been privatised and turned into monopolies are also often owned by foreign companies (Clifton et al., 2008). None of these were to be challenged by right-wing Brexit. Whoever owns Britain it is certainly not the British people. We can now conclude by setting out the way in which Brexit challenges centrist liberal ideas.

Conclusions: Down the Rabbit Hole?

'I believe that we can be the greatest country on earth'.

Boris Johnson (Gildea, 2019: 245).

In world-system terms Brexit offered British voters four options, three to leave and one to remain. All these options are criticisms of the legacy of centrist liberalism. If we start with the remain vote, what did that mean? The EU has transformed as an institution since the 1980 s into *economic Europe* and away from *social Europe*, despite the wishes of its supporters (Giddens et al., 2006; Bailey, 2008). It has made many important and undemocratic decisions about its development and is now, like the UK, committed to militarism and NATO, proposing austerity as a means of paying for re-armament – as the *Financial Times* commented, a transition from welfare to warfare (Ganesh, 2025). The EU has come to represent aspects of both the *neoliberal* and *clash* thesis in its embrace of free markets, militarism, and with a proliferation of member governments and parties increasingly shaped by far-right rhetoric and hostility towards migrants. Further it has defended and supported the ongoing genocide in Gaza, making only the mildest of criticisms in its defence of Israel (Ayyash, 2025). This is quite a different picture of the EU to the one which presents it as the cosmopolitan defender of centrist liberal values and a post-Westphalian system.

Whilst the successful leave campaign was able to create an alliance between right-wing free traders and right-wing nationalists it is difficult to see how this alliance can survive in the long-term, so different are the interests for each constituency. Free trade requires a world *without* borders or barriers to trade, and which promotes the free movement of goods, services, investment, and people (Samuelson and Nordhaus, 2010: 361; Ohmae, 1990). By contrast, the nationalist call for sovereignty wants to prioritise the nation and borders over all other things. Many leave voters hoped that it would lead to a fairer welfare system and a better quality of life, neither of which have emerged (Ashcroft, 2016).

For the leave voters there were three choices of which only Lexit rejected both the *clash* and *neoliberal* narratives. For Lexit the future for Britain resided outside the EU in a form of state-led socialism (Tuck, 2020). By contrast the two dominant strands of the right-wing Brexit campaign both drew upon *neoliberal* and *clash* ideas and rhetoric. For right wing nationalists Britain would become a sovereign nation controlling its borders and taking back control. This aspect of the campaign often drew upon xenophobia, propaganda and PI rhetoric and symbols to promote its agenda, ably supported by sections of the UK press who glossed over its overt falsehoods (Spickett-Jones and Niinien, 2023; Zečić-Durmišević, 2020; Gaber & Fisher, 2022; Birks, 2021; Zappettini, 2021; Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019; Cassidy, 2020).

For right wing free traders Britain would become the Singapore of Europe, harkening back to its Victorian golden age, as the declaration from Boris Johson suggests. Again, this played upon the PI theme of the UK as the great trading nation, ignoring the reality of its history as an imperialist and colonial state shaped by gunboat diplomacy and military power. The promise of leaving the EU was to restore the UK to its place as the world's premier trading nation-state, committed to free trade, democracy and the global economy, and underpinned by patriotic right-wing nationalism (Slobodian, 2023; Outhwaite, 2017; Iakhnis et al., 2018). The analysis

was that to solve the problem of the UKs long-term structural economic and social decline it would be necessary to replicate the conditions of the mid-C19 when the UK became the world's major global power and hegemonic state. This was encapsulated in the idea that the UK would become 'Global Britain', which as Porter notes was an explicit imperialist theme (Kwarteng et al., 2012; Woolfson, 2017).

It is not difficult to see the emotional appeal of such narratives, but they gloss over many things crucial to that period in British history. The UK was committed to Free Trade in the C19 at a time when it could lay down its own terms for international trade agreements as the world's dominant manufacturing power, using force where unwilling parties resisted, such as China. Further, and as we have noted already, the UK was built upon a foundation of colonialism, militarism, violence, and war, with a distinct absence of democracy or even rights for workers or women. Thus, the idea of limiting dissent, removing regulation of business, and further dismantling the rights of trade unions, are all part of the *neoliberal* and *clash* agenda in post-Brexit UK (Prentoulis et al., 2017; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2017). Turning the UK into the Singapore of Europe means in practice creating an island nation-state with an increasingly authoritarian and coercive government, limited rights for workers, increasingly draconian curbs upon public assembly and dissent, and effectively giving a free hand to corporate interests (Curless, 2016). Ironically, perhaps, it should be noted that the International Trade Union Confederation report for 2022 places the UK as a worse country for trade union rights than Singapore (ITUC, 2022: 14). These trends have all become part of the post-Brexit reality for UK political economy under successive governments and they now cut across the transformed political spectrum. For example, former Conservative Party Chancellor of the Exchequer Nadim Zahawi suggested that the Army be used to break public sector strikes and the Labour Party's leader Sir Keir Starmer ordered Labour MPs and cabinet members not to support striking workers on picket lines (Reuters, 2022).

The twin axes in the UK opened by Brexit are the movements towards nationalism and towards class conflict. Opposition nationalist movements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are challenging the unity of the UK whilst at the same time working-class resistance to the austerity generated by Brexit and successive governments is gathering momentum with an unprecedented wave of strikes affecting the country (Whiteside, 2016; McEwen, 2022; Connolly & Doyle, 2019). For British political culture what is clear is that the embrace of *neoliberal* and *clash* ideas, a tendency seen across the core of the world-system, has gathered momentum and produced xenophobic and authoritarian policies and rhetoric that cuts across the mainstream political parties (Micocci & Di Mario, 2017). This outlook was encapsulated by current UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer in a pre-election interview with the *Sun Newspaper*,

'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll put the staff back in the return's unit," he said in his reply. "I'll make sure we've got planes going off. Not to Rwanda, because that's an expensive gimmick. "They will go back to the countries where people come from. That's what used to happen. At the moment, people coming from countries like Bangladesh are not being removed because they are not being processed' (Osley, 2024).

Sir Keir Starmer's impassioned desire to support forced repatriation for illegal Bangladeshi migrants indicates how far political discourse has shifted to the far-right

in the UK since the emergence of the first Thatcher neoliberal government. Neoliberalism has led to the normalisation of far-right politics and rhetoric with the rise of the Reform party as an increasingly powerful force in UK politics (Mattei, 2022; Micocci & Di Mario, 2017). Starmer's statement could easily have come from Reform party leader Nigel Farage or predecessors such as Enoch Powell. In the 1960s and 1970s Powell was beyond the pale politically because of his views on migration into the UK. For expressing his anti-immigrant ideas about forced repatriation of migrants Powell lost his place in a Tory government, while for Starmer it secured his support from *The Sun* Newspaper for the UK election in July 2024. Right-wing Brexit nationalism has left its imprint on contemporary UK political culture as the state-social compact underpinning centrist liberalism decays ever more rapidly. To be clear, what is happening in the UK is happening across the core of the world-system. As core nation-states have polarised after decades of *neoliberal* policies and the emergence of *clash* rhetoric and movements, so far right and neo-fascist forces have strengthened, claiming the mantle of spokespeople for working class communities decimated by deindustrialisation. From all this one can conclude that the period of centrist liberalism has passed.

Declarations

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals None.

Informed Consent Not applicable.

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