

Race, Class, and Strategy in UK Left's Brexit Debates

- AND -

**Examining the Rise and Fall of Jeremy Corbyn's
Labour Through the Lens of Populism**

by

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Declaration of Committee

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Examining the Rise and Fall of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Through the Lens of Populism

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Abstract

Essay 1: During the 2010s, insurgent movements emerged on both ends of the political spectrum challenging political establishments across Europe. In the UK, UKIP's populist nationalism encouraged xenophobia and anti-EU sentiments, while a reinvigorated left under Corbyn's Labour attempted to challenge the neoliberal hegemony. The Brexit referendum was a victory for UKIP but had a bifurcating effect on the fledgling left movement under Corbyn, dividing his coalition into Remainers, who deemed the nationalism and xenophobia of Brexit antithetical to left-wing agenda, and 'Lexiters', who saw Brexit as a working-class revolt against austerity and opted for a sympathetic stance. Engaging key empirical studies and a range of left-wing analyses, I argue in this essay that both class- and race-based interpretations of the Brexit vote are reductive. Operationalizing Nancy Fraser's lens of "redistribution without recognition", which intertwines socioeconomic and identity-based factors, I demonstrate that sector- and community-specific analyses of Brexit offer a more effective basis for anti-neoliberal political strategies.

Essay 2: Corbyn's ascent to the leadership of the Labour party has been regarded in popular and academic discourses and by advocates and critics alike as part of the populist wave that engulfed Europe during the 2010s. Corbyn's 2017 surge was heralded as a victory for left populism and his 2019 defeat discussed as part of the demise of left populism and often engaged with, on the left, through the shortcomings of the populist strategy or the shortcomings of the movement in implementing the strategy. Examining the conditions surrounding Corbynism's rise and fall 2017-2019 and a range of prominent left-wing commentaries, I demonstrate in this essay the inadequacy of 'thin' conceptions of populism - defined through the abstraction of 'the people' vs 'the elite' - in guiding left strategy and argue in favour of a distinction between such a rendition of populism and a broadly majoritarian left strategy grounded in community organizing and coalition building.

Keywords: Brexit; UK general election; Jeremy Corbyn; working class; race; neoliberalism; left populism; left politics; Labour Party; majoritarian politics

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my political mentors and heroes, Jean Swanson, and Wendy Pedersen, who have been at the forefront of a decades-long grassroots resistance in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver against the most inhumane crisis of homelessness in Canada and to the 500 dedicated volunteers who made COPE's 2018 City elections campaign a historical success for the local left.

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Finally, I wish to acknowledge that at the time of this writing a superpower-backed genocide against the people of Palestine that is live-streamed into our day to day existence overshadows every aspect of our lives. Every accomplishment is rendered relative against the backdrop of the monstrosity of this automated killing machine. That one is able to go on is a possibility borne out of existing within communities that nurture hope for a future in which freedom, justice, and self-determination prevail from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean Sea and for the oppressed people the world over, including the Indigenous people of Canada—and for this I am immensely grateful.

I aspire for this inquiry to find its intended audience and inspire constructive dialogue.

Table of Contents

Declaration of Committee	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vi
Essay 1: Race, Class, and Strategy in UK Left’s Brexit Debates	1
Chapter 1. Introduction	2
1.1. The Return of the Working Class	4
Chapter 2. Brexit and a Divided Left.....	7
2.1. The EU in the Left Discourse.....	8
2.2. ‘Lexit’ vs ‘Remain and Reform’	10
Chapter 3. Who Voted for Brexit: Empirical Studies	14
3.1. Empirical Challenges	14
3.2. Key Empirical Findings	16
Chapter 4. Analysis and Discussion	24
4.1. Class Revisited	24
4.2. ‘White Riots’ vs the ‘Left Behinds’	26
4.3. Redistribution without Recognition	31
Chapter 5. Conclusion.....	34
References.....	36
Essay 2: Examining the Rise and Fall of Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Through the Lens of Populism	42
Chapter 1. Introduction	43
Chapter 2. Framing the Politics of Corbynism.....	48
Chapter 3. Corbynism Through the Years	54
3.1. 2017: Many Against the Few	54
3.2. 2017-2019: Rise of ‘the People’s Vote’	58
3.3. 2019: A Brexit Election	60
Chapter 4. Reactions and Analysis	64
4.1. A Right-Wing Sabotage	64
4.2. From Bennism to Blairism.....	67
4.3. A Path to Victory?	71
4.4. Populism vs Majoritarianism	75

Chapter 5. Conclusion.....	80
References.....	85

Essay 1:
Race, Class, and Strategy in UK Left's Brexit Debates

Chapter 1. Introduction

The 2010s were a decade of crisis in Britain (Watkins, 2020). In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, many posited the end of neoliberalism (Kotz, 2009; Rudd, 2009), but while the crisis-ridden years since have seen a breakdown of the neoliberal consensus (Byrne et al, 2020), the old Gramscian dictum rings true time and again, that the old system may be dying but the new order cannot quite be born—a period Streeck refers to as the “post-capitalist interregnum” (Streeck, 2016). One of the features of this era has been a rise in regional and nationalistic sentiments (Jäger, 2021). In the UK, the era was marked by the rise of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), culminating in the Scottish Independence referendum, and the referendum on EU membership of 2016.

What set in motion a series of events that paved the way for the Brexit referendum, as Watkins details (2016), was the discontent in the Conservative party triggered by the EU Fiscal Compact of 2011, a new EU-wide austerity agreement in response to the Eurozone crisis. This was not an objection to austerity per se, but a political opportunity to frame transnational economic treaties as constituting a threat to UK sovereignty and to relitigate long-standing anti-EU sentiments. Pressure mounted on Cameron, externally by UKIP’s rising support in Tory areas, and internally by the Tory right’s demand for a public consultation on EU treaties. The success of the 2016 Brexit referendum is often seen as Cameron’s gamble, which turned the Tory right’s demand for a vote on an EU treaty into an in-out referendum, backfiring. This, Watkins writes, “was representative of a wider insouciance among ruling groups who had operated for so long in a vacuum of apathy and voter demoralization and failed to register the slow, still inchoate politicization that had been taking place in the aftermath of the financial crisis.” (p. 15)

In the post-2008 era, the success of the Brexit referendum was a watershed moment. The Leave vote’s slim margin of victory locked Britain into a state of crisis, disunity, and soul searching for years after. It inspired a slew of commentary that declared the referendum as the end of an era and the sign of a coming reckoning. The vote was said to spell the end of half a century of economic and foreign policy, weaken Europe and the West, and unleash rival populisms of left and right (Byrne et al, 2020;

Stephens, 2016). Barnett (2017) described the year 2016, with the Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US, as a year of revolution, comparable to 1968 in importance, its events expressions of a set of seismic crises – of the state, the economy and politics on both the left and the right—eerily, as Barnett notes, it was also described in similar terms by Farage, the chief operative of the referendum and UKIP's leader.

During this period, a newly invigorated left movement was also emerging on the political horizon in the UK, following in the footsteps of similar trends across Europe and North America. Starting with the 2011 Occupy movement in the US, this new anti-capitalist left had roots in the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle and the Iraq war protests of 2003. Propelled by the financial crisis of the 2008 and the deepening of austerity measures, this new movement radicalized and initiated a new generation of leftists into the political mainstage. By the mid-2010s, this oppositional energy was fuelling the rise of left populist electoral movements across Europe, initially, in Greece with the rise of SYRIZA, later in Spain and France, and finally to the English-speaking countries (Venizelos & Stavrakakis, 2022).

In the UK, which is the focus of this essay, the anti-austerity left had just begun to seize control of the Labour party a year prior to the Brexit referendum, with the unexpected ascent of Jeremy Corbyn to party leadership in 2015. This new movement seemed on a path to reclaim the Labour party from the remnants of Blairism and to use it as a vehicle of insurgent left politics at a time when the hegemony of neoliberal politics was crumbling and the need for articulating an alternative was stronger than ever (Worth, 2019; Mason, 2017). Openly leftist and socialist outlets in the UK, such as Novara media, Canary News, Double Down News, the Tribune, etc., were beginning to operate at mass scales, having found, through their association with the Labour party, a new exposure to mass politics and a chance at successfully growing their audience. Intra-left debates within a vibrant intellectual milieu energized by Corbynism and by discussions of strategy, grounded in the real possibility of a Corbyn government, were more abundant and animated than in the decades prior, within an atmosphere of a growing convergence and hope in the possibility of change.

The Brexit vote had at first a disorienting effect and a progressively bifurcating one on this fledgling left movement as they struggled to accurately map this new

phenomenon and position themselves in relation to it. The movement was divided into the Remainers, who deemed Brexit antithetical to the left agenda, emphasizing the xenophobic and nationalistic prejudices that underpinned the politics of Farage, Johnson, and the Brexit movement, and Lexiters, who read the Brexit vote as a working-class revolt against the politics of austerity and globalization, and opted for a more sympathetic stance.

In this essay, I will first discuss the left debate on Brexit and the ways in which it intertwined with the Corbyn movement. Next, drawing from empirical studies of available Brexit-related data, I will engage with the debates on the ways in which race, class, or both featured into the identity and motivations of Brexit voters. Through this analysis, I will highlight the insufficiency of class-reductionist and race-reductionist interpretations of Brexit and the need for a left strategy that is informed by a theoretically and sociologically grounded framing of the effects of race and class, and the ways in which both are interpellated by the Brexit discourse and mutually articulated in the contemporary context of neoliberal global capitalism.

1.1. The Return of the Working Class

In the UK, the nature and the location of social class has had a distinct trajectory. In the post-war period, Britain was largely divided into two classes, a working class organized into trade unions and represented by the Labour party, and a middle class in professional, managerial, administrative jobs, and aligned with the Conservative party (Heath, 2015). Working class identity however was never a static reality. In Britain, it has always been intertwined with a distinct collectivized culture and communal identity shaped through collective political struggles, as depicted most prominently in E.P. Thompson's seminal account of the English working class (1991).

In the 1980s, the Thatcher government ushered in a series of economic, social, and political, reforms, which, both materially – through privatization, deregulation, deindustrialization, globalization of the economy and attacks on trade unions – and discursively – by promoting a rhetoric of individualism, entrepreneurialism, and Britain as a 'home owning democracy' – devastated the fabric of this collective working-class identity. Many working-class jobs and communities were regionally concentrated around the mining pits and manufacturing plants that Thatcher closed.

The New Labour government of the late 1990s and the 2000s exacerbated the erosion of class politics. It weakened Labour party's ties to traditional working-class communities and trade unions and prioritized social mobility over working-class identity. The concept of social exclusion, mobilized by the New Labour in this period, became synonymous with the failure to take advantage of the new opportunities the society afforded to individuals. This led to a widespread dis-identification with working-class identity (Skeggs, 2008; Skeggs, 1997). By the end of the New Labour government self-identification with a working-class identity was at an all-time low.

Despite this, some have argued that contrary to popular belief, class politics never went away (Cannadine, 1999). What's more, the last decade and a half of neoliberal crisis has brought class politics back to the forefront of the political discourse. Parallels have often been drawn between the political and economic crisis of the late 2010s and the crisis of 1970s which paved the way for a Thatcherite neoliberal revolution (Beckett, 2019); Yet another parallel is a reconfiguration of class politics, this time with the working-class staging a rhetorical comeback. This time however the markers and boundaries of class are far more chaotic and contested and are more often delineated with "class non-voting" rather than class-based party allegiance (Evans & Tilley, 2017).

In the aftermath of the EU referendum, a cross-section of the centre and the left—from op-eds in the centre-left *Guardian* and *New Statesman*, to editorials in the 'far left' outlets of *Counterfire* and *Morning Star*, declared the vote as a victory for the working-class and a blow to the neoliberal establishment (Harris, 2016; Jack, 2016; Counterfire editorial, 2016; Molyneux, 2016). The Leave vote was rhetorically characterized as the revolt of the have-nots, the poor, and the impoverished—labels that were often used interchangeably with 'the working-class', 'the left behind', the 'outsiders', and the 'globalization losers'—against the haves, the ruling elite, and the cosmopolitan 'winners of globalization' (Goodwin & Heath, 2016b; Hobolt, 2016). Goodwin and Heath's empirical research further refined this category by emphasizing a correlation between the 'white working-class' and the Brexit vote (2016a). Others have objected to this characterization of Brexit by resorting to a counterargument that holds the white and the middle-class responsible for delivering the vote (Dorling and Tomlinson, 2019; Antonucci et al, 2017; Bhambra, 2017; Hanieh & Webber, 2020).

Aside from the question of which class was “responsible” for Brexit, and whether a class-based interpretation of Brexit is valid, the emergence of the white working-class signifier through the Brexit debate, with its residual symbolism, mobilizes its own set of politics. McKenzie (2017) argues that within the contemporary political discourse, to which Brexit debates are no exception, the “white working-class” has become a devalued signifier and identity, synonymous with “abject and white” (p. 277)—a devaluation that is also echoed in the rhetoric of the “left behind”. It has become associated with “underachievement” (Adjogatse & Miedema, 2018)—a likely legacy of the Blairite era of social mobility and the association of fixed class identity with personal failure. Within the contemporary discourse, the working class is no longer the locus and lifeline of economic and political activity it once was. It has become associated with the “residuum” than the “respectable working-class” in the Charles Booth 19th century Darwinian mapping of the London population (McKenzie, 2017, p. 266). To this can be added the Marxian mapping of the ‘lumpenproletariat’ as occupying a socioeconomic positioning distinct from that of the proletariat, with the discursive function of ‘the working-class’ today falling somewhere closer to the former than the latter (Barrow, 2020). Additionally, the return of the working-class is observed as not a racially inclusive descriptor. Hanieh and Webber (2020) argue that the deployment of the working-class in the Brexit discourse is embedded within an implicit assumption of whiteness. De Witte (2022) contends that the white working-class identity is more often mobilized against the non-white working-class and in opposition to the discourse of multiculturalism, than against the bourgeoisie or the middle class. Adjogatse & Miedema (2018) further add that the disproportionate media and political attention given to the “white working-class boys” obscures issues that are common across diverse social groups. As such, the spectre of the “white working-class”, re-emerging through the Brexit discourse, stands as something that is not entirely working-class nor entirely white, but a proxy for a specific locale, history, and a set of psycho-social anxieties in the context of a crisis-ridden globalized economy and multiculturalized working-class.

Chapter 2. Brexit and a Divided Left

The chaotic and problematic return of class in the popular discourse posed unforeseen challenges for the emergent left movement, which through its own traditional leftist invocation of class politics sought to mount a majoritarian challenge to neoliberal capitalism and austerity. These movements which drew tactically on populist strategies (Venizelos & Stavrakakis, 2022) and strived to form a coalition of heterogeneous social movements and marginalized social and economic positionalities, class-based included (Worth, 2019), had a complex and uneasy relationship to class (Huber, 2023). In the context of Brexit, this unease was conjoined with the unsettled positionalities of class and race within the globalized neoliberal capitalism of contemporary Britain.

Moreover, Brexit posed an additional challenge over the question of Europe, with Lexiters and Remainers engaging in a struggle over shaping Labour party's policy in response to the phenomenon that swept the nation. There is a distinct lineage of Euroscepticism on the left, politically championed by people like Tony Benn, an intellectual leader of the Labour party in the 1980s and Jeremy Corbyn's mentor, while intellectually the pillars of a critical assessment of capitalism and democracy under the European Union were established by left figures such as Perry Anderson (Gowan & Anderson, 1997) and Wolfgang Streeck (2014). Yet, as Brexit exposed, the contemporary UK left possesses an indeterminate relationship with the EU, partly attributable to the fact that Euroscepticism of the right, of which Brexit is an instance, has always been stronger in the UK and overshadowed that of the left (Watkins, 2016). Moreover, the infrequency of public consultation over the EU treaties in the UK has resulted in insufficient public debates over the UK's relationship with the EU. Unlike the rest of Europe where plebiscites on EU treaties were common practice, in the UK, both Labour and Conservative Prime Ministers one after another reneged on the promise to put various EU treaties to a public vote—a consequence, Watkins argues, of their treating the EU as a foreign policy rather than a domestic matter (p.13).

Brexit brought to fore previously unresolved tensions for the left vis-à-vis the European Union. The reality of free movement within the EU and the UK becoming “the employer of last resort” (Thompson, 2016) for European labour in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis, exacerbated the left's dilemma. As the EU economic crisis grew post-

2008, fueled by uneven internal development of the union and the structural problems of the single currency policy, it culminated in the Greek debt crisis of 2015 and a face-off between the government of SYRIZA and the European Troika, who proved intent on preserving the neoliberal order with an iron fist. “It was unconscionable”, Finn (2021) writes, just a year after the “waterboarding of the SYRIZA government in Greece, [...] for any honest politician of the Left to give the EU his or her wholehearted endorsement.” At the same time, “it was also unthinkable for a Labour leader to recommend a Leave vote in a debate where the nationalist right had effectively monopolized that position for decades.” (p. 121) The left was ultimately stuck, as the *Jacobin* editors put it, “between remaining within an institution antithetical to our aims, and gambling that we can turn the period of crisis which would undoubtedly follow a Leave vote to our advantage.” (2016)

Many prominent left figures made “the socialist case for Brexit” in the run-up to the referendum and in its aftermath, arguing that it was indeed possible to use the chaos period following a Leave vote to the left’s advantage (e.g., Davidson in an interview with *Jacobin* editors, 2016; Bickerton & Tuck, 2017; Guinan, 2017). This position however remained marginalized in the Labour party and increasingly more so after 2017. The public discourse around the referendum was dominated by the divides within the Tory party and Corbyn’s sensible Remain and Reform position, which focused on minimizing the anticipated harms of Brexit, struggled to break through (Finn, 2021).

2.1. The EU in the Left Discourse

The disagreements over the nature of the EU were part and parcel of the irreconcilable positions of Lexiters and Remainers. Remainers argued that the EU, in its inception, was a social democratic project and it can still be steered back toward its original purpose. An exit would wreak havoc without having any of the desired effects. Traditionally, liberal Remainers saw the EU as a safeguard against extremism at national levels, and against the risk of repeating the atrocities of the 20th century. Some left Remainers argued a parallel point from an economic perspective, seeing the EU treaties as, on some level, containing and regulating the free will of capital (Gough, 2020). The EU, as an arbiter of the balance between capital and labour, is required, in exchange for the free movement of capital to also guarantee a minimum of rights to EU workers. The balance is not always achieved perfectly, as Remainers argued, but the EU courts in theory have the power to hold capital to account (Dunt, 2017)—at least more so than the

national governments do—especially in an era where capital is more ‘always-already-global’ than ever. From this view, Gough (2020) interprets Brexit as an intensification of neoliberalism, which by removing transnational regulations and granting free reign to neoliberals at the national level, worsens the situation of the workers. Conversely, Yanis Varoufakis, former SYRIZA MP and the leader of the DiEM25 movement for the democratic reform of the EU, takes into account the potential benefits of the EU structure for movements of social justice and argues that the only way for the European left to achieve a transnational Green New Deal would be through utilizing this structure and its vast resources (Taylor & Nelson, 2019). This possibility alone makes it necessary and worthwhile, according to him, for the left to stay within the EU and fight for democratic control over it.

From the other side of the debate, Lexiters criticized the Remain and Reform position as abstract and impractical, and without a “political force” to carry it out (Hatherley, 2019). Lexiters saw the EU as an unaccountable behemoth, which was proved closed to reforms as recently as the Greek debt crisis of 2015. While liberals see in the EU’s ‘parental supervision’ of domestic democracies a necessary safeguard against extremism, many on the left see an obstacle to democracy itself, foreclosing the possibility of social democratic reforms on behalf of the majority (Bickerton & Jones, 2018). Concretely, they argued that the restrictions the EU places on member-states would have posed barriers to Corbyn’s social democratic reforms, specifically to his nationalization program. For these and other reasons, they believed that the left should have used this opportunity to champion the leave vote from an anti-neoliberal perspective.

Remainers pushed back against the notion that the EU laws were a barrier to social democracy in Britain, pointing to the cases of Germany and Scandinavia. They argued that only a fraction of the proposals in the Labour manifesto would ever face potential barriers under the EU laws and that an exit was unwarranted and bound to be too disruptive. They argued that the adverse effects of Brexit on the EU workers and immigrants residing in the UK, and the culture of xenophobia and anti-immigration fueled by tabloids and key Brexit figures, should be central to the left’s response to Brexit. Lexiters, in response, pointed to the increasing militarization of the EU’s outer frontiers (Jacobin Editorial, 2016) and to the role of the union in the deterioration of conditions for the non-EU migrants outside its borders.

Overall, the liberals and liberal-leaning segments of the left interpreted the movement for Brexit as a nationalist revolt steered by the far right and opposed it on those grounds, while the Eurosceptic left interpreted it as a blow to the global capital and its vehicle for imposing neoliberal austerity across Europe, and ultimately, as an opportunity for the left to organize against neoliberalism. The irreconcilability of these positions rested to a great extent on the different interpretations of the identity of Brexit voters. In the next section, I will further discuss the underpinnings of the Remain and Leave positions and their relationship to the Corbyn campaign before moving on to a discussion of the identity of Brexit voters.

2.2. ‘Lexit’ vs ‘Remain and Reform’

The pro-EU stance which regards the EU as a bastion of social democracy and a safeguard against extremism, exhibits at its core a skepticism toward popular democracy with its potential to spin in unwanted directions—with the Brexit referendum itself being an instance of it. Occasionally, this skepticism was openly expressed in the debates over Brexit, exposing an anti-democratic streak among left Remainers. An instance of this is an exchange between Gourevitch and Mason. Gourevitch in his *Jacobin* article advocates from a left perspective for the UK to “leave the EU already” (2019) and reclaim its national sovereignty against the EU’s anti-democratic and unaccountable structure. Where Gourevitch expresses concern over the prolonging of Brexit negotiations and the possibility that the parliament will “fail to carry the will of the people”, Mason (2019) responds by saying that “[i]n the British constitution, which was clearly outlined in a Supreme Court decision in 2017, only parliament can express the will of the people.” Gourevitch’s depiction of the UK sovereignty being threatened by the EU appears rather simplistic, considering the UK’s status as one of the wealthiest and most powerful players in the European and global stage. Similarly, equating a contested referendum with a slim margin as “the will of the people” is not unproblematic. Conversely, Mason’s argument that equates the will of the parliament with the will of the people is a bureaucratic and de-politicized formulation. Especially, in the context of what has been described as an intensification, since 2008 of a “crisis of representation” (Roberts, 2015) among the political establishment and a general loss of trust in the traditional political parties. Mason’s deference to the political establishment to express

the popular will—a view not uncommon among liberal Remainers—when carried to its logical conclusion would rule out insurgent politics from the left’s agenda altogether.

The problem for Lexit, on the other hand, was that the longing for a working-class revolt against austerity and globalization—perhaps even for the eventual rise of the ‘gravediggers of capitalism’—interfered with a clear view of the reality and blinded many Lexiters to the dangers of fraternizing with the far right, especially as the weaker partner in the coalition. While Lexiters in the Labour party criticized the party’s pro-Remain stance in 2019, regarding it as a symptom of the movement being “insufficiently working-class” (Burtenshaw, 2019), left Remainers criticized Lexit’s class-based reading of Brexit as a symptom of a tendency toward class-reductionism and toward conceiving of the working-class in terms that are predominantly white and English and excluding of migrants and racialized people for whom Brexit would mean a deterioration of working and living conditions (Hanieh and Webber, 2020).

Additionally, Lexit also suffered from the same abstractness and impracticality that it accused Remain and Reform of. This is succinctly illustrated in another part of the Mason-Gourevitch exchange. Where Gourevitch writes that the “[EU] member-states retain the worst, coercive elements of statehood while reducing the influence of the democratic element, allowing elected officials to avoid accountability by retreating into supranational and intergovernmental institutions”, Mason responds: “This is correct. The problem for the left is what to do about it given that the EU is also a ‘regulatory superpower’ which can dictate market regulations even to states that are not members.” Mason’s critical challenge exposes a blind spot of the Lexit camp about the extent of the EU’s influence, which further points to the ways in which the popular discourse in favour of Brexit has been mobilized by a fantasy of standing up to a superpower and “taking back control” by “leaving already”, as per Gourevitch’s title. This, as Mason notes, is neither a solution nor exactly an option, given that as long as the EU exists as a regional superpower, the only way for the UK to leave its sphere of influence to the satisfaction of sovereigntists would be to float away from the continent. Yet, the success of Boris Johnson’s campaign slogan of “Get Brexit Done” later that year proved just exactly how powerful this fantasy was among the electorate.

As such, Lexit’s concern with sovereignty and democracy risked appearing abstract while the livelihoods of EU migrant workers hung in the balance. Remainers

often interpreted this as a tell-tale sign of veiled nationalistic sympathies on the side of Lexiters and a misappropriation of working-class sympathies, especially since according to some accounts the middle class were believed to have played a crucial role in the vote. Moreover, to the extent that Brexit was backed by segments of the working-class, there was an ideological function to it less reflected upon by Lexiters: By portraying the EU as a convenient enemy, even if the critiques were deserved, the Tory right was deploying nationalism and xenophobia to gain working class buy-in for “a new stage in the neoliberal class war from above”, as Gough (2020) argued. This had the double effects of creating race-based divisions within the working-class, resulting in a hostile working environment for migrants and racialized workers, on the one hand, and on the other, deteriorating working conditions for all by removing the UK from the EU regulatory framework.

It should be noted that the arguments for Lexit worked only insofar as they were part and parcel of the promise of a program of social democracy under a future Corbyn government. Lexiters’ response to Gough’s critique would have been that a Corbyn government could disrupt, in theory, the Tory right’s courting of the white working-class, take advantage of the chaos, so to speak, and pivot toward economic justice (Blakeley, 2018; Lapavistas, 2019). It would be interesting therefore to hypothesize about the left’s response to Brexit in the absence of this possibility. Without the possibility of a Corbyn government on the horizon, arguments against EU’s democratic deficiencies, which have had a longer history than the present moment, were unlikely to find purchase on the left, since the left’s weak position would have excluded it from influencing Britain’s post-Brexit future.

But for a few years after the referendum, as negotiations with the EU were ongoing, Brexit held multiple potentialities. The UK could choose to implement a more social democratic or a more xenophobic/neoliberal (per Gough’s critique) Brexit. What Lexiters counted on was the possibility of social democracy under Corbyn in a post-Brexit UK to disrupt the Farage-ian far-right vision for Brexit. The 2017 election and Corbyn’s unexpected surge held for a brief period a glimpse into such a possibility. It was closer than ever in the early 2019 when the Corbyn team negotiated with the May government for a Norway-style soft Brexit (Jones, 2019b). But there was little consensus on the left over such a proposal, especially as it would have agreed to the end of free movement, which was unacceptable to Remainers. The absence of a clear and

convincing left Brexit plan created a vacuum at the heart of the Lexit argument, arguably constituting its biggest flaw, and contributing to its inability to convince enough people on the left that an exit was both necessary and could be turned to the left's favour. In the end, there simply was not enough support on the left to materialize a different kind of Brexit. The Corbyn team opted out of negotiations with May and adopted the policy of a second referendum in the 2019 General Election, giving voters the option of a Tory Brexit only, with its potential for a no-deal exit, or another referendum with the possibility of no Brexit at all, and deciding to settle matters at the ballot box. As this episode demonstrates, the fortunes of any form of a Left Brexit were always bound up with that of a Corbyn government.

Lexit's defeat was exacerbated by the rigidity of the left Remainers' categorical condemnation of Brexit, which foreclosed the possibility of a leftist engagement with Brexit voters in a way that was informed by the critiques of globalization and of the EU as an anti-democratic regulatory superpower. This is echoed in the rest of Mason's response to Gourevitch, where he emphasizes that a leftist engagement with Brexit should be determined first and foremost by the knowledge of the xenophobic intentions behind the vote. Mason rejects Gourevitch's framing of the vote as an outcome of "long-standing frustrations" with a lack of control over political decisions, not because he believed it untrue, but because the said frustrations manifested as a desire for control over immigration. This is to say, that according to Mason, even though the frustrations were valid, because their manifestation was illegitimate and reactionary, fighting them, rather than empathizing with them, should have formed the basis for a left strategy (Mason, 2019).

Which of these seemingly irreconcilable positions more suitably constituted a 'left' response? This was the question at the centre of the Brexit debate on the left. The inconclusive nature of the debate has come to highlight the categorical inefficiency of the abstractions of Left and Right and the exhaustion of their effectiveness in an era of dealignment (Cunliffe, 2022). The debate highlights that there is little consensus today as to what constitutes left politics. Still with Remain ultimately winning out in setting the terms of Corbyn's Brexit policy, the balance of forces is skewed in one direction.

Chapter 3. Who Voted for Brexit: Empirical Studies

No empirical question has in recent history generated the amount of enthusiasm and heated debate among UK social scientists and political commentators as the question of the identity of Brexit voters. Was the vote for Brexit fueled by a class outrage or by xenophobia and a deepening of culture wars? The answer to this critical question naturally informs the political consequences of the vote and the left movement's strategy.

The debate over the identity of Brexit voters remained unsettled for years after the referendum. But this was not due to a scarcity of data or lack of comprehensive studies. Rather, it was the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the insights drawn from the data and the difficulty of constructing a coherent narrative from it that gave rise to a variety of partial readings. By 2019 it was raging as earnestly as in the run-up to the vote, so much so that the 2019 general election was deemed the Brexit election. The Conservatives' majority was interpreted as a hard Brexit mandate for the Johnson government and re-aligned UK politics based on Brexit for years to come.

3.1. Empirical Challenges

The first challenge with interpreting the 2016 outcome was the very slim margin of Leave's victory. Did the slim margin mean that the victory was a mere contingency, the outcome of the Leave campaign's million-pound populist campaign, and their systematic misrepresentation of facts (such as the much popularized £350 million price tag) or the reported instances of cheating? Possibly even by poor weather conditions on the day of the referendum or other factors impacting the turnout?

Questions such as these could not be easily put to rest and were only compounded, as time passed, by more structural challenges to the legitimacy of the referendum. Pro-Remain scholars, Dorling and Tomlinson, argued that the vote was to be understood in terms of the voices that were missing from it, such as low turnouts in Scotland and London, and the exclusion of those aged sixteen and seventeen and those UK residents holding EU citizenships, who would be affected the most by the vote (2019, p. 37). However, with the data that is available the story of who voted for Brexit is not straightforward and it cannot be argued with any certainty that those inclusions would have overturned the outcome or presented a clearer picture.

The second challenge was that politically, the 2016 Leave vote did not strongly correlate with support for any of the major parties. It had a cross-cutting impact on both Labour and Conservative parties. In terms of the popular vote, the Leave-Remain divide in the Tory base resembled the national divide. For the Labour party, the divide was less intense, but with a 30-70 percent it was a divide, nonetheless. Liberal Democrats, Greens, and the SNP all had majority Remain bases. While this shows the Leave vote more highly represented among the Conservative base and the Remain vote more strongly associated with the centre and the centre-left, the split in both the Conservative and the Labour base suggested a more complex narrative than a left/centre vs right split. Empirical analyses demonstrate a significant correlation with support for UKIP (Becker et al, 2017), but this too is not a sufficient explanation as UKIP is a newer phenomenon without representation in the parliament (except for one MP), and support for UKIP among Eurosceptic voters is not surprising as UKIP's mission was first and foremost to oppose the EU. Moreover, voters without any party affiliations were also strongly represented in the Leave vote (Swales, 2016; Antonucci et al, 2017).

Thirdly, the Leave vote's cross-cutting effect was compounded by the discrepancy between the popular vote and the seat-level count. The referendum was conducted at the local authority level, which could not be easily mapped onto the Westminster constituencies and made comparisons with the general election data particularly cumbersome. A seat-level count was never reported officially, due to the unavailability of the data required to directly juxtapose local authority boundaries onto those of the constituencies. Approximations, through mathematical modeling, of how Leave and Remain votes mapped onto Westminster constituencies revealed more than two-thirds of the seats having pro-Leave majorities (Hanretty, 2017), which spoke to a spread and strength to the anti-EU sentiments not conveyed by the Leave vote's meagre margin of 51.89 percent. This only made the task of accurately interpreting the Leave vote more urgent and consequential. Since then, the 2019 General Election should also have offered a reckoning with this reality for any Remainers tempted by the slim margin to underestimate Leave sympathies nation-wide.

Fourthly, a host of surveys and polls published after the vote attempted to present a picture of the general tendencies that characterized the Leave vote, but these tendencies were often contradictory or lacked sufficient explaining power. In terms of demographic factors, the following are some of the highlights from Lord Ashcroft's Brexit

exit polls (2016): While older voters were inclined to vote Leave, a majority of the AB and C1 social groups were inclined toward Remain. Younger people, students and those with university degrees were strongly inclined toward Remain, and so were full-time and part-time workers, but C2, D, and E social groups as well as those unemployed and without university degrees were strongly inclined toward Leave. Some cultural factors that are less surprising also show: White voters were slightly more inclined toward Leave, with Black, Asian, and Muslim voters strongly preferring Remain; self-identified Christians were more inclined toward Leave and religious minorities strongly inclined toward Remain. And finally, geographically, larger metropolitan areas predominantly voted for Remain, while smaller towns in areas all over the North, Midlands, East and Southwest were more inclined to vote Leave. While many have used such poll data to draw a narrative of Brexit reducible to a singular factor—often class-based or race-based—more comprehensive empirical studies draw a much more complex and nuanced picture.

3.2. Key Empirical Findings

Empirical studies of the available datasets published in 2016 and 2017 tried to capture the full extent of the identity, socioeconomic positioning, and the motivations of Leave voters, and the consequences of the vote. I will present the findings from three such studies in this section: Becker et al (2017), Clarke & Whittaker (2016) and Swales (2016).

1. Clarke & Whittaker's (2016) study, published by the progressive think tank, Resolution Foundation, examines the available demographic data at the Local Authorities level throughout England.

Their analysis reveals a negative general impact of the hourly pay rate on the Leave vote, but they identify significant outliers to this pattern, which they divide into four distinct categories: a) Low and very low paying occupations with very high likelihood of Leave; b) low-paying but with low likelihood of Leave, c) high and very high paying with low likelihood of Leave; and d) high paying with likelihood of Leave. They then set out to locate the variables that explain and predict these tendencies. They find the following factors negatively impacting the Leave vote at the Local Authority level: employment rate, student numbers, education levels, and cultural cohesion; And these factors

positively impacting the vote: changes in non-UK born percentages (2004-2015) and rates of home ownership¹ (p.24).

Among these variables, employment rates and education levels (more specifically degrees) are shown to be primary factors, capable of distinguishing between the two higher paying groups as well as the two lower paying groups. Secondly, they demonstrate education to have strong correlations with cultural cohesion, demographics (including percentage of non-UK born), and pay levels (p.18). They write: “The strength of the correlation with higher qualification levels in an area is particularly telling, with this variable closely associated with both economic and wider cultural factors.” (p.29)

In terms of home ownership, the bulk of the Local Authorities (LAs) that are higher-paying-low-Leave have a home ownership rate of more than 70%, while this number for the bulk of the lower-paying-low-Leave LAs is between 20 to 50 percent, for the higher-paying-low-leave it is anywhere between roughly 35% to 75%, and for the lower-paying-low-Leave LAs is roughly between 50% to 70% (p. 10). At the same time, they also note that renters in council housing have a higher tendency toward Leave. Regarding percentages of non-UK born in a local authority, they do not observe a correlation between levels of immigration and support for Leave, but change in levels of immigration in the preceding decade proves significant, with areas that have experienced a rapid growth in immigration in recent years more likely to vote Leave. They also demonstrate the impact of geography by uncovering, through regression analysis, “the tendency for different regions to vote differently even after controlling for all other factors.” (p. 29)

Overall, they conclude that “cultural and geographical factors play a key role,” as represented by the importance of “feelings of cohesion within the local area, and by the tendency for different regions to vote differently even after controlling for all other factors.” Additionally, they conclude that “the geographical distribution of living standards influenced the referendum vote, with employment having a significant effect”, while “recent changes in pay appear not to have had a significant effect, implying that living standard issues are long-established.” (p.29) This complex picture and the existence of the four distinct outlier groups, within the context of an overall negative impact of income

¹ This means the higher the factors in the first group, the lower the likelihood of voting Leave, and the higher the factors in the second group, the higher the likelihood of Leave.

levels, defies any convincing reduction of the Leave vote to a single demographic, position or attitude. It would be difficult given this picture to claim any socio-economic positioning or class for the Leave vote, yet at the same time, it would be inaccurate to claim no correlation with the economy at all (as argued by Kaufmann, 2016, for instance).

2. Another key empirical study, produced by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), examines three of the “highest quality sources of data” (p. 3) and longest running social attitudes studies, in a report penned by Kirby Swales (2017). They too confirm Clarke and Whittaker’s observation (2016) that the Leave vote has been delivered by a heterogenous coalition.

Firstly, they observe that of those surveyed only 43 percent believed that the economy would be made worse off by leaving the EU, supporting the argument that “the Remain campaign failed to persuade enough people that there would be a significant economic downside of leaving the EU.” (Swales, 2016, p.29) Their findings confirm the Leave vote being the preferred choice for those feeling disenfranchised by the political system, as it shows 54 percent of those who did not vote in the 2015 General Election, 70 percent of those who said they identified with no party, and a majority of those who agreed with having “not very much or no interest at all in politics” or the statement that “politicians don’t listen to people like me” being more likely to vote Leave. They also note that while identification with ‘left’ or ‘right’ were not significant, Leave voters tended to demonstrate ‘authoritarian’ as opposed to ‘libertarian’ tendencies and ‘anti-welfare’ as opposed to ‘pro-welfare’ attitudes. Swales argues: “This suggests that this debate might be increasingly decided by views on acceptable social behaviour and moral fairness, rather than redistribution and the role of the state” (p. 15).

Despite these observations, their further findings on how the Leave vote segments the population discourages any aggregate-level reductions. They break down the electorate into five statistically significant identity groups, which elaborates on Clarke and Whittaker’s four outlier areas. Two groups, which they label “middle class liberals” and “economically deprived, anti-immigrants” are those who have most distinctly voted one way or another: the former most overwhelmingly for Remain and the latter for Leave. Three other groups are identified whose commitment is not as clear cut but still significant: the “Older working classes” (16 percent of the population, predominantly

voting Leave), “the Younger, working-class Labour voters” (25 percent of the population with 39 percent Leave voting), and the affluent Eurosceptics (23 percent of the population and 75 percent for Leave). Swales emphasizes that none of these groups individually ‘represent’ the Leave vote, asserting that data-driven demographic analysis confirms that the Leave vote was “underpinned by the campaign’s ability to draw together a broad-based coalition. It is much more wide-ranging than the ‘left behind’.” (p.27) This diverse coalition bespeaks the diversity of motives that has convinced voters of Brexit, described by Hazeldine in *New Left Review*:

Some people voted Leave because of concerns about national sovereignty, others because they wanted to reduce immigration, and still others because they wanted to give the domestic political establishment a good kicking or register a protest against long-term neglect of their post-industrial regions. (2017, as cited in Finn, 2021, p. 123)

In conclusion, Swales (2016) writes:

It is clear that the Leave vote was most concentrated amongst those with least economic resources. However, in order to win the Referendum, the Leave vote mobilised a broader base of supporters. Almost half of those who said they were ‘doing alright’ financially voted Leave, as well as almost 40% of those describing themselves as middle class. There is no simple explanation for the Leave victory based on demographics alone, though it is clear that age, levels of education, income and newspaper readership are all related to the likelihood of voting Leave. Beyond this, matters of identity are equally if not more strongly associated with the vote to Leave – particularly feelings of national identity and sense of change over time. (p.7)

Should this broad-based coalition be regarded as a sign of the success of the Leave campaign or of the spread of anti-EU sentiments among the electorate? The British Social Attitudes dataset collected by NatGen since the Maastricht treaty reveals that Euroscepticism in the UK reached an all-time high in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis followed by the Eurozone debt crisis. “By 2015,” Swales writes “there was clear evidence that the UK was in a Eurosceptic mood, with two thirds opposed to the UK’s existing relationship with the EU. Twenty-two per cent said we should leave the EU and 43 percent wanted a reduction in EU powers.” (p.5) Noting that even in 2015 it was only one fifth of the population that believed an exit was warranted, he argues that the question of what tipped the balance, and whether the success can be contributed to contingent factors or is a sign of deep-seated attitudes within the population, requires

more investigation. Regardless, they conclude, “[The vote] is a strong sign that the so-called ‘culture wars’ of the US have arrived in Great Britain in earnest.” (p.27)

3. Becker et al (2017), at the Department of Economics of the University of Warwick, tackle this very question, among many others, in yet another comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic characteristics of Leave voters, conducted using geographically disaggregated data at the levels of city wards and of local authorities inclusive of Scotland and Wales. They study socio-economic factors in five categories: political variables, exposure to the European Union, public services provision and impacts of austerity, demographic and human capital characteristics, and the underlying economic structure. Despite the breadth of the study and the extent of factors considered, they maintain that no causal explanation of the result can be offered due to the “obviously multi-causal and multi-faceted” (p. 2) nature of the vote. Still, using machine learning methods they set out to discover factors with the most predictive power.

In summary, they find the fundamental characteristics of the local electorate to have the strongest predictive power, alongside electoral support for UKIP². They identify age and educational qualifications, a history of manufacturing employment, low income, and high unemployment as the key drivers of the Leave vote—many of which, especially age, degrees, and high unemployment were also observed by Clarke and Whittaker.

Becker et al. refine these findings by exploring correlations with secondary factors. In terms of anti-immigration, they observe that only growth in recent migration levels (measured between 2001 and 2011) and specifically from the Eastern European EU countries are positively correlated with the Leave vote. This finding aligns with Goodwin and Heath’s observation of the impact of “the experience of sudden population change” (2016a) and with Clarke and Whittaker’s observation about the higher levels of Leave vote in areas with low feelings of social cohesion, defined in terms of how well people of different backgrounds “get on” (2016, p. 17). Becker et al. further elaborate on the impact of this factor by observing through counterfactual analysis that had the UK phased in EU migrations in 2003, as many other European countries had done, it would

² Support for UKIP has been analyzed elsewhere to be driven by Euroscepticism predominantly, and anti-immigrant sentiments (Whittaker and Lynch, 2011; Clarke et al., 2016, as cited in Becker et al, 2017), but as discussed before does not add more insight than is known about Leavers.

have led to a reduction in Leave's margin of victory, even though it would not have altered the outcome.

Next, in a crucial observation, their study shows a negative correlation between the Leave vote and public spending. They observe that in areas with "a larger share of the workforce in public employment, a measure of (a) availability of public services and (b) public jobs", the Vote Leave share is smaller:

We find that the quality of public service provision is also systematically related to the Vote Leave share. In particular, fiscal cuts in the context of the recent UK austerity programme are strongly associated with a higher Vote Leave share. We also produce evidence that lower-quality service provision in the National Health Service is associated with the success of Vote Leave. (p.39)

While in counterfactual analysis, slower migration growth was shown to lead to a smaller margin of victory for Leave, such analysis of fiscal cuts and improved NHS provisions is shown to bring the Leave margin below 50 percent:

Our results indicate that modest reductions in fiscal cuts could have swayed the referendum outcome. In contrast, even drastic changes in immigration patterns would probably not have made a difference. (p. 1)

Next, they repeat their analysis at city wards level. The Brexit geography is too often reduced in public discourse to presupposed cultural and economic divides between the North and the South, or interpreted as reflecting, in Goodwin and Heath's phrasing, a "hardening of a 'cosmopolitan vs provincial' divide" (2016a). While such divisions hold some truth in the Brexit map, Becker et al.'s (2017) city ward level analysis within the metropolitan areas decisively dispels any geographically overdetermined reading of Brexit. It also exposes the existence of growing socio-economic chasms. They demonstrate wide variations across city wards, while ultimately confirming that the same patterns and correlations observed at the local authority level across the UK can also be observed at wards level:

...even across wards within cities (for instance, across wards in the Borough of Greenwich in London), 'weak' socio-economic fundamentals are strong predictors of the Vote Leave share. [...] The fact that support for Vote Leave may be less visible in a large city like London is merely down to composition effects in that London has relatively strong socio-economic fundamentals on average compared to the rest of the country. (p. 39)

Finally, using a predictive machine-learning based analysis, they rule out the impact of contingent factors such as heavy rainfall and train cancellations on the day of the referendum and of other short-run phenomena such as the particularities of each campaign or their personalities. They conclude any change would have been too marginal to overturn the outcome: “the Remain campaign would still have lost on a sunny day.” (p.4)

In conclusion, Becker et al (2017) effectively argue that:

The voting outcome of the referendum was driven by long-standing fundamental determinants, most importantly those that make it harder to deal with the challenges of economic and social change. They include a population that is older, less educated and confronted with below-average public services. We therefore doubt that a different style of short-run campaigning would have made a meaningful difference to vote shares. Instead, a more complex picture arises about the challenges of adapting to social and economic change. (p. 39)

Overall, these studies demonstrate the impact of what Becker et al (2017) call “weak socio-economic fundamentals” on the Leave vote, but this impact is often mediated by secondary factors and driven by long-standing demographic factors. That the Leave vote has been impacted by long-standing conditions is also echoed in Clarke and Whittaker’s observation that in Leave districts recent hourly pay change did not meaningfully impact the outcome of the vote (p. 4). Goodwin and Heath (2016a) also repeat this claim by arguing that “overall, it was areas where people tended to earn less that voted for Brexit even if these were not always the communities that had been the most badly affected in recent years.” They further argue, using data that tracks public attitudes toward the EU over time, that “fundamentals of the Brexit vote did not suddenly appear in 2016 but were ‘baked in’ long ago.” (Clarke et al, 2017)

Despite these empirical findings, the debate over whether Brexit’s majority was a transient phenomenon, whipped up by the tabloids and the machinations of unscrupulous far right politicians, or a transitional one, exposing deep-seated unrest that has been hitherto suppressed, did not settle for years after. As negotiations with the EU dragged on, the call by ardent Remainers for a second referendum grew louder (Cohen, 2019), mobilized by a conviction, no doubt, that another referendum would yield different results—in light of Remainers’ newfound resolve to turn out, and a sizable portion of Leavers reportedly experiencing ‘Bregret’ (Becker et al, 2017).

The second referendum never materialized, but the 2019 General Election, which was bitterly fought along the Brexit battle lines and delivered a much disheartening – for Labour supporters and hopeful Remainers alike – majority for the Conservatives, should have been clear evidence that millions of Leavers’ commitment to Brexit had far from dissipated. The 2019 confirmation of Brexit demonstrates that not only was 2016 not a fluke, but that, despite some time having passed since the finalizing of the UK’s exit, the Brexit rhetoric and divide will continue to shape UK politics.

Next, I will discuss analytical interpretations of the vote, examine them against the empirical findings, and draw further insights.

Chapter 4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Class Revisited

Oxford geography professor, Danny Dorling, in an article published in the aftermath of the referendum, refutes the working-class basis of the Leave vote with a counter claim that, using Ashcroft's data, in fact "the Leave voters among the middle class were crucial to the final result" (2016, p. 1). Dorling and Tomlinson's book-length take on Brexit later offers a powerful critique of the imperial nostalgia that underpins the Brexit discourse, as well as the impact of austerity, globalization, and the worsening of socioeconomic conditions. Their argument about the middle-class portion of the vote however, which is widely cited, and popularized in a BBC segment (2016) is often used as a way of not just refuting Goodwin and Heath's 'left behind' Northerners thesis (2016b) but to go the opposite direction and associate Brexit squarely with the white and middle-class constituencies from the South and the East.

Dorling and Tomlinson's claim about the middle class seems counterintuitive, given the reported tendency of the lower social strata toward Leave in various exit polls including Ashcroft's, that is, until it becomes clear that Dorling and Tomlinson's observation is drawn from absolute numbers, which they remark as "the numbers that matter" (2019, p. 37). The absolute numbers, they claim, are informed by the higher turnout of the middle class (defined as the ABC1 social grade) compared to other social grades and their larger share of the population. The problem with absolute numbers, which Dorling and Tomlinson do not further elaborate their reliance on, is they can obscure contextual meanings. For instance, the C2DE social grades not only turned out more relative to the 2015 elections but also voted more for Leave relative to their share of the population. While it is typically the case that the higher social grades have higher turnouts, compared to the 2015 General Election the increase in the turnout of the C2DE social grades is higher in the Brexit referendum than that of the ABC1 group (Ipsos Mori, 2015; "2016 Referendum", n.d.). Moreover, based on the NRS 2016 data (NRS, n.d.), the ABC1 social grades constitute 55 percent of the population but represent only 47 percent of the Leave vote, according to Ashcroft's data.

In their analysis of geographical region's voting behaviour, Dorling and Tomlinson turn to differential turnouts and show the East region and not the North and the

Midlands, turning out in much higher numbers and voting for Leave in strong margins, which they interpret as a stronger enthusiasm for Brexit (2019, p. 35). This observation, which leads them to labelling Essex as “the capital of Brexit” (BBC Newsnight, 2016), also constitutes a component of their claim of the Leave vote’s association with the middle-class, since they categorize Essex and other areas of the South with similarly high differential turnouts as “middle class counties” (p. 273). As discussed at the outset, the ‘working-class’ in the contemporary discourse has come to be used synonymously with poor, impoverished, ‘left behind’, and low income. Dorling and Tomlinson utilize the middle-class as a negation of such a condition, and a proxy for ‘not exactly impoverished’, by relying on regional average incomes and a broad sweeping application of the social grades. As impoverishment is not a suitable proxy for class or for socioeconomic positioning, the absence of it is similarly not a predictor of either.

In a quest for identifying the class of voters, some empirical studies focus on the Leave voters’ profile of feelings. Lebrini, et al (2017) show that perceptions of worsening personal finances, which are not the same as actual financial situations, are correlated with the Leave vote. Antonucci et al (2017), while observing through empirical study an association between the Leave vote and working-class self-identification, contextualize this finding by pointing to a tendency of people in middle-class jobs to self-identify as working-class (p. 216). They then assess the profile of feelings attributable to Leave voters, such as feelings of “worthlessness” and “life having got complicated”, etc., and drawing from Colantone and Stanig’s (2016, as cited in Antonucci et al, 2017) characterization of Brexit as “the effect of a social/economic malaise”, conclude that the condition of “economic malaise” fits the emotional profile of the “squeezed middle”, rather than the “angry and left behind”, with no educational qualifications (p. 224). While there is no denying that psycho-social elements have played a strong role in the outcome of the Brexit referendum, a glaring absence from the debate over the socioeconomics of Brexit is a consistent theory and application of the class factor.

In the absence of a more structural analysis of class positions, given that an association between the Leave vote and socioeconomic conditions has been empirically established, studies that offer more refined analyses of the socioeconomic conditions on the Leave vote and the ways in which they are mediated by other factors can offer crucial insights. I will review some of these insights in the next section and apply them to a discussion of whiteness and nationalism in the context of Brexit.

4.2. 'White Riots' vs the 'Left Behinds'

While empirical studies show general correlations with factors such as income, education, age, geography—and crucially, as highlighted by Dorling and Tomlinson, differential turnout levels—there is evidence in other studies that these factors mediate and co-determine one another in complex ways that warrant further exploration.

In one instance, Liberini et al (2017) show that the strong effect of age is skewed by the disproportionate preference of the youngest voters toward Remain. Once adjusted for turnout (which is lower among the younger groups), they show that the age group most inclined toward Remain is 35-44 and preferring Leave is no longer linearly determined by age. In another instance, Antonucci et al (2016) show that the strong negative effect of education on the Leave vote is skewed by the disproportionate preference of those with higher levels of education toward Remain. On the lower levels of educational qualification, there are greater variations with the lowest levels of education not necessarily most inclined toward Leave. In fact, behaviour at those levels is shown to be mediated by financial situations of the voters. Those with intermediate levels of education are shown to be more likely to vote Leave *if* they perceive their financial situations to have worsened recently—a behaviour profile typically attributed to the so-called 'left behind', but nonetheless exhibited by relatively educated voters (p. 215). Further on this point, Goodwin and Heath (2016a) show that geography overrides the impact of education, with higher or intermediate level voters tending to vote Leave when they lived in low skilled leave-voting areas.

Regarding race, there are many studies, with strongly pro-Remain persuasions associating the Leave vote with whiteness. Hanieh and Webber (2020) in an article in *Spectre* argue against an association with the working class or economic deprivation among Leave voters, echoing Dorling's point about the middle-class. They highlight an association between the Leave vote and whiteness by drawing on Ashcroft's poll data and an article by Sayer (2017) in the journal of *History of Sociology* which characterizes Brexit and the rise of Trump as 'white riots'. Hanieh and Webber write:

So, what other social markers might have a stronger correlation with support for Brexit? The first crucial factor is the question of race: Whites voted in support of Brexit (53 to 47 percent) while the vast majority of Asian (67 percent), Black (73 percent), and Muslim (70 percent) populations strongly opposed it. Indeed, those areas that voted Leave in 2016 had

remarkable levels of racial homogeneity: Of the one hundred and two districts in England and Wales where the Leave vote exceeded 60 percent, white Britoners comprised more than 80 percent of the population in all but four districts (Sayer, 2017). This tight relationship between race and Brexit stance is extremely important in understanding the ideological nature of the Brexit campaign and is something we return to in depth below. (2020, p. 34)

But there is a different way of looking at the statistics provided by Hanieh and Webber too: In a country with only 15 percent or less non-white population, it seems rather significant that almost half of the white population rejected Leave³. Keeping in mind that empirical studies do not identify whiteness as a strong predictor of Leave (although there is a loose correlation), 53 percent of white voters (which in the survey conducted by Swales, 2016, consists of 51 percent white British) voting for Leave does not seem disproportionately large when placed against the Leave vote's margin of victory (51.89 percent) or the whites' share of the overall population. In England, where whites make up close to 75 percent of the population and the Leave vote had a slightly higher margin of 53.4 percent, the white share of the Leave vote is slightly less than their share of the population. While Asian, Black, and Muslim voters are clearly underrepresented in Leave, the significantly lower turnout rates for the non-whites should also be considered, which would work in both ways: making the white vote more significant in absolute terms, but in relative terms making the non-white vote less meaningful, as it is a smaller sample of this population. While Dorling and Tomlinson (2019) as well as Hanieh and Webber (2020) rightly critique the exclusion of EU citizens and younger voters from the referendum and point to higher turnouts of the whites and those in the upper social classes, these insights also need to be acknowledged as the limitations and shortcomings of the electoral structure. Without relative insights, analysis of the outcome of any elections will simply be reduced to the preferences of the majority.

Hanieh and Webber (2020) further argue that aside from whiteness, Englishness should also be considered a key explainer of the Leave vote. To counter the 'economically impoverished' narrative of Leave, they point to much poorer areas in Scotland and Northern Ireland having voted for Remain to conclude that Brexit is in fact "a quintessentially English affair" (p. 35). While they rightfully note, as empirical studies have shown too, that poverty in and of itself is not a predictor for the Leave vote, similar

³ The UK population was made up of 84 percent white Britons in the most recent census, and of 87.1 whites overall.

studies also show that socioeconomic factors cannot be ruled out. The different voting patterns in different countries of the UK, rather than being read as a case of English exceptionalism, can be regarded as a symptom of different expressions of nationalistic sentiments. Scotland, for instance, as Dorling and Tomlinson put it, “clearly had a different enemy to worry about. For the Scots, the dominant institution taking away their sovereignty was based in London, not Brussels” (2019, p.38), which is to say that Scots too have arguably voted in line with concerns of sovereignty and national interest. Similarly, Northern Ireland can be argued to have had their own regional concerns in terms of what Brexit would mean for their border with the Republic of Ireland and had overall very little interest in turning out (p. 34)—and rightly so as this issue ended up a major source of turmoil during the Brexit negotiations (p. 17).

Regional aspirations and rivalries have intensified in the UK post-Brexit, with the appearance of Northern England’s Independent party. This phenomenon, which has in fact been on the rise throughout Europe, can be characterized as a by-product of the age of globalization and a backlash against post-nationalism, driven ultimately by political economy (Jäger, 2021, p. 47). Given this backdrop of regional motivations, Brexit being a quintessentially English affair appears a truism: simultaneously true and lacking in explanatory power. Ultimately, it was not all English people who voted for Brexit—only 53 percent—therefore, differentiation within English (and Welsh) borders are warranted. The difference between the countries can also be read in line with Goodwin and Heath’s empirical insight into the ways in which geography overrides other factors (2016a). Clarke and Whittaker (2016) have also shown the independent impact of geography, when controlled for other key variables, within different regions of England. In other words, impoverished or deindustrialized areas in England and Scotland behaving differently does not rule out impoverishment or deindustrialization as relevant factors, but shows their impacts to be mediated or overridden by geography. That said, the significance of geography should not be taken too far, as studies have also shown similarities among Leave constituencies in different regions (Becker et al, 2017).

Looking further into the question of race, Sayer’s article (2017), which Hanieh and Webber (2020) draw from, analyzes the list of the top ten Leave voting areas to demonstrate that only two of them fit the stereotype of deindustrialized East Midlands towns. Five others are in the East Midlands but with a very different socioeconomic profile:

Lincolnshire [where most of the districts are located, is] an agricultural county growing and processing grains, beet, canola, flowers, and vegetables—industries that do not employ a large permanent workforce but rely heavily on unskilled, seasonal labor. In recent years, this need has been met by European migrants, especially from the East European countries admitted to the EU in 2004. Lincolnshire has an aging population (21% are over 65, compared to 16% nationally), mostly living in small towns and villages. (p. 97)

Sayer further adds that the level of unemployment in Lincolnshire is around the national average, and “median weekly wages range from £417 in Boston to £530 in North Lincolnshire”, which is lower than the national average (p. 98). The rest of the top ten districts are in the East of England, in and near Essex. These areas he notes have some of the highest levels of Leave voting anywhere—an insight consistent with Dorling and Tomlinson’s highlighting of Essex. The following is a snippet of Sayer’s depiction of the areas of Canvey Island in South Essex and Great Yarmouth in the Norfolk coast, which are home to several of the top ten Leave voting districts:

Great Yarmouth (71.5% Leave) is a borough [...] on the Norfolk coast, [...]. Yarmouth’s days as a thriving fishing port are a distant memory. The last fisherman quit in December 2009, blaming “the EU’s quota system for forcing him out and for destroying the town’s fishing fleet over the past decade, but there were only a handful of boats based in the harbor as far back as the 1980s. Yarmouth’s tourist industry, like that of other coastal areas around the country that voted leave [...] has also languished since working-class Britons started vacationing abroad back in the 1960s. The area has an aging (22.9% over 65), overwhelmingly white (96.9%), and mostly British-born (92.8%) population, a median weekly wage of £450, and an unemployment rate just above the national average. Castle Point (72.7% Leave) in south Essex is also aging (19.3% over 65, 7% aged 75–84), 96.6% white, and rural, and has an average rate of unemployment and an above-average weekly wage of £570. Its largest town, the one time seaside resort of Canvey Island, has a population of 38,170. (p. 98)

While Sayer does not dispute that the deindustrialization narrative has “some purchase in some localities” (p. 97), he argues that crucially, what the deindustrialized areas have in common with those in Lincolnshire, and in Essex and its surrounding districts is not socioeconomics: it is whiteness, racial homogeneity, and low levels of migration.

There are several issues to discuss with regards to this claim. Firstly, characterizing these areas as having low levels of migration does not seem sufficient, as in the case of Lincolnshire the EU migrant labourers are crucial to the economy of the

area⁴. Moreover, as noted in empirical studies, an analysis in terms of change in migration levels is more relevant to the vote than just levels of it. Furthermore, in places such as Lincolnshire with the recent arrival of EU migrant workers what Clarke and Whittaker refer to as low social cohesion is also relevant—as highlighted in John Harris’s depiction of the area in *Guardian* (2016).

Secondly, as far as whiteness is concerned, as Sayer himself notes, a large concentration of white people is a general feature of most areas of England outside metropolitan cores—since, naturally, for both cultural and economic reasons immigration levels are much higher to larger cities. Empirically, it bears repeating that studies do not find whiteness to be a meaningful predictor of the Leave vote. Sayer’s analysis of the whiteness of the Leave vote would only be valid if in areas with lower levels of whiteness, but with otherwise similar factors, the Leave vote meaningfully dropped. But such a drop is only observed when looking at larger metropolitan areas, where socioeconomic dynamics are also significantly different. Sayer further backs up his claim of associating the Leave vote with whiteness and racial homogeneity by looking to London where all five districts that voted Leave had a white British population above the London average while most Remain areas had much higher racial diversity (p. 99). Then again, one of the five Leave-majority districts of London (Barking and Dagenham) is also home to London’s lowest-paid workers (Bennett, 2022) and the other four have significantly lower than London average incomes. This analysis confirms, as Sayer himself puts it elsewhere, that “these data do not wholly undercut the case for an association between voting Leave and economic deprivation, they suggest that any such connection is (at best) strongly mediated by other factors” (p. 97). It further highlights that any analysis of Brexit that does not account for the ways in which race and class are historically mutually articulated, or for the complex relationship between immigration and class, is bound to tell an incomplete and possibly misleading story.

Thirdly, while deindustrialization may not be the common feature of the top ten Leave districts, contrary to Sayer’s argument, a commonality of socioeconomic experiences between the East and the East Midlands cannot be easily ruled out. Half of the top twenty communities identified in recent research by Oxford Consultants for Social

⁴ further necessitating a clearer distinction between racial homogeneity and non-UK born population.

Inclusion (OCSI) as ranking highest in the Community Needs Index, and experiencing various degrees of deprivation (referred to colloquially as a 'left behind' community) are in the East of England (Local Trust, 2020) with many others in Yorkshire, North East, and the East Midlands. The index, which is defined in terms of "poor community and civic infrastructure, relative isolation and low levels of participation", measures social infrastructure, levels of connectivity and cohesion within a community. The list includes Castle Point, an area highlighted by Sayer, and many others that also feature among the top ten Leave districts, suggesting the possibility of a strong correlation⁵. Lincolnshire is also identified as one of the highest on the Community Needs Index in the East Midlands region, along with deindustrialized areas in the North and the East Midlands. It should be noted that this index is not a determinant of 'class' per se: Based on the study's characterization of the regions, it should be understood as a measure of socioeconomic status based on regional opportunities and development, impact of fiscal cuts, and public spending on local infrastructure or lack thereof—factors that are observed by Becker et al (2017) to have a discernible impact on the Leave vote. The insight from the OCSI research further highlights that if variations within the London districts are warranted, Essex and the East of England also cannot be painted with Dorling and Tomlinson's (2019) broad brush of "middle-class counties."

Moving on to the relationship of places such as Lincolnshire and Canvey Island to the EU, there are hints in Sayer's depiction of the areas about the impact of globalization and EU integration, including the impact (perceived or real) of the EU quota system, the impact of globalization on the loss of traditional economic activities, and the integration of EU migrant farm workers into local economies. As well, the 'left behind' places fit the description of districts that are in Becker et al.'s (2017) analysis recipients of EU regional development funding, while also contradictorily, exhibiting higher anti-EU sentiments (2017). In the next section, I will elaborate on this complex relationship.

4.3. Redistribution without Recognition

In an article on the sociology of Brexit, William Davies (2016) offers insights into Leave region's seemingly contradictory relationship with the EU, with an analysis that intertwined socioeconomic and cultural factors. Focusing on the predicament of the

⁵ though one has not been established empirically.

deindustrialized towns, he remarks that “the geography of Brexit reflects the economic crisis of the 1970s, not the 2010s”, meaning the Tory cuts triggered by the 2008 crisis do not tell a complete story of Brexit. He argues that the Leave regions failed to receive a successful “spatial fix” – drawing on Harvey’s notion that describes capitalism’s tendency to expand geographically in order to address problems of overaccumulation. This is to say, these regions have failed to attract private sector investment or develop new industries to replace the ones lost to globalization and neoliberal structural reforms. The entrepreneurial growth promised by neoliberalism never materialized. The deindustrialized areas, Davies argues, having lost their dominant industries, i.e., pits and manufacturing, received in their place only low productivity service jobs through the Blair government’s “shadow welfare system”, a policy of redistribution via tax rebates. “In Nancy Fraser’s terms,” Davies writes, “New Labour offered ‘redistribution’ but no ‘recognition’. This cultural contradiction wasn’t sustainable and nor was the geographic one.” Through EU policies, this fiscal dependence on a redistribution of wealth from the more productive regions of the UK to the less productive, turned into dependence on the EU funds and trade benefits, which were increasingly seen as “hand-outs”, further eroding the communities’ sense of dignity, productivity, and self-sufficiency (Davies, 2016).

While Davies’ point is centred on the deindustrialized areas, a parallel can be made with the port towns in the East of England that have lost their fishing and tourism industries (as depicted in one example by Sayer) to the forces of globalized economy. The UK farming industry is similarly caught in a complex and contradictory relationship with the EU, where the farmers benefit from EU subsidies but can exercise little control over their work and product—an issue that was reported comprehensively on by the LRB (Meek, 2016) in the lead-up to the referendum. This offers yet another picture of what Davies calls “redistribution without recognition”. A spirited rejection of the EU and a yearning to “make Britain great again” is also exhibited in some of the farmers’ rhetoric and their demand to take back control of their lands, according to a poll and interview by the Farmers Weekly, as well as some hints of ‘Bregret’ (Clarke, 2019). While whiteness and nationalistic sentiments feature in their anti-EU expressions, the impact of socioeconomics underpinning these sentiments is also evident. Post-Brexit, these farms are in a critical position, facing the possibility of going out of business, due to the loss of the subsidies that sustained them (Horton, 2023).

While these instances are not a substitute for a more comprehensive sectoral-based sociological and ethnographic analysis of the Leave vote, they point toward the potential of such analyses of the Brexit vote based on a sector's relationship with the EU to have the strongest explaining power regarding the motivations and the consequences of the vote. Davies's lens of "redistribution without recognition", even though applied originally to the deindustrialized areas vis-à-vis the EU, captures both the cultural and the economic undercurrents of the Leave vote in regions with different socioeconomic makeups and histories but with potentially similar patterns of dependence on the EU and similarly impacted by austerity and absence of government investment.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

My review of the empirical studies of the composition of the Brexit vote demonstrates that factors such as education, age, geography, and income levels strongly correlated with the referendum outcome, while whiteness per se was not a predictor of the vote. More refined empirical analysis has shown that the correlation of these factors with the Leave vote is not linear, and some factors tend to mediate, mitigate, and articulate others. These studies paint a picture of the socioeconomic conditions driving the vote, but the way in which this impact shows up is complex and mediated through other factors such as geography, changes in immigration levels, education, and relationship with the EU. I have shown that while ascribing a particular class, be it “middle class” or “working class” to the Brexit vote, would be reductive and misleading, especially in the absence of a consistent theory of class and by relying solely on income levels and social grades, the concept of “left behind”, as distinguished by the OCSI’s Community Needs Index, better characterizes some of the areas with the highest margins of Leave, such as Lincolnshire in the East Midlands, and Castle Point, South Essex in the East. Drawing on Davies’s sociological analyses of the deindustrialized Leave voting areas and his characterization of their predicament as “redistribution without recognition”, which captures the relationship of socioeconomic dependence these regions were locked into vis-à-vis the EU, resulting in a cultural and nationalistic backlash that was characteristic of Brexit, I argue that this lens can be more broadly applied to the understanding of the relationship between the Leave vote and the socioeconomics of ‘left behind’ places, and places with dominant sectors such as farming and manufacturing that have been negatively impacted by the processes of globalization. A sector-based sociological and ethnographic analysis of the Leave vote would be needed to confirm this insight. My analysis also deconstructs the notion of the “white working class” and its association with the Leave vote by focusing instead on the processes that motivated the Leave vote from a socioeconomic perspective and their working in tandem to fuel the rise of an identitarian response—spanning racial, regional, and nationalistic sentiments.

If the predicament of the UK farmers post-Brexit is any indication, as the critical voice of Remain pre-Brexit which struggled to break through at the time predicted, the deindustrialized and ‘left behind’ areas that used to benefit from EU subsidies and

structural funds, as well as the manufacturing areas that were beneficiaries of trade integrations with the EU, all of whom have shown strong tendencies toward voting Leave, post-Brexit will find their economic situations worsening, since having ‘taken back control’ has meant no more EU benefits, and it is unlikely they will receive much support from the right-wing UK government either. Such a situation would be a confirmation of the analysis of Marxist geographer, Jamie Gough (2020), of Brexit as a political maneuver by the right-wing to obtain working class buy-in for a “new stage of neoliberal class warfare” and in the last instance an intensification of neoliberalism. The removal of the EU subsidies from UK farming industries (and other EU related benefits as they apply to other areas and sectors) and the UK government’s refusal or inability to maintain those subsidies will amount to another round of divestments and cuts and only deepen the existing economic crisis. It would simultaneously pose opportunities for the left to organize in the ‘Bregret’ areas. Meanwhile, a structural analysis of class can position these sectors in relation and resistance to the forces of globalized capitalism and help counter a reductive view of these populations based on their reactionary cultural identities. Gough (2020) argues that taking a class angle to Remain would have entailed a focus, not so much on the general threat of Brexit to the economy and not primarily on the racism and xenophobia of Brexit voters either, but a focus on the existential threat that leaving the EU posed to maintaining the manufacturing sectors of the UK economy. This argument can be expanded to include other productive sectors and inform further analysis and left strategy.

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**Essay 2:
Examining the Rise and Fall of Jeremy Corbyn's
Labour Through the Lens of Populism**

Chapter 1. Introduction

The 2010s were a period of renewal and hope for the European left. The post-2008 era in Europe and the Americas saw the rise of a new political force on the left that conjoined grassroots energy with electoral strategy to take anti-austerity politics to the ballot box. This emergent political force has been described as left-wing populism, presumed to mirror the strategy of its right-wing counterpart. Especially since the European elections of 2014, Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis write “...if the debate over European populism was, until recently, mostly targeted at the right end of the political spectrum, the picture has now significantly changed with the emergence of prominent populist actors that belong to the left or the radical left” (p. 1).

In the wake of the 2008 crisis, austerity policies and a bail-out of the banks were implemented with a consensus across the political establishment, launching Western societies into crises of socio-economic and political orders. The socio-economic crisis precipitated the unraveling of neoliberal hegemony (Byrne et al, 2020) giving rise to anti-austerity movements. With the crisis of representation in the political domain (Roberts, 2015; Rooduijn, 2018) the establishment parties were seen as “too domineering and self-serving, too closely attached to the workings of the state and less sensitive to the people’s needs and aspirations” (Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2019, p. 9). This further fueled popular frustration and discontent, motivating grassroots anti-austerity movements, and seeking alternative avenues of representation.

The populist turn on the left is regarded as an outgrowth of the Occupy movement, whose spontaneous mass character provided an effective medium for the outpouring of anger and frustration in reaction to the post-2008 bailouts and austerity measures. Sparking the popular imagination outside of the US, the movements of *Indignados* in Spain, and the *Aganaktismenoi* in Greece were formed in a similar style as horizontal and leaderless mass protests and later moved to mobilizing alongside the left parties with the goal of capturing political power (Jäger, 2019). Despite the grassroots movements’ success in making a mark on the politics of the day, the electoral move, Jäger argues, came as a necessary strategic recalibration when it became clear that “the crisis was not enough” to sustain the grassroots energy.

But it was not just the populists on the left who were warming up to the electoral strategy. The “crisis of representation” was propelling populists of various persuasion onto the mainstream political stage with claims of representing the interests of the marginalized and the disenfranchised against the self-serving and unresponsive elites, giving rise to more “elusive forms of protest” (Jäger, 2019) that sometimes escaped straightforward classification, but often adopted a reactionary tenor. The right-wing and reactionary populists overall appeared better suited than the left to “channel broader popular frustrations over the management of the economic crisis by mainstream political forces” (Katsambekis & Kioupiolis, 2019, p. 2) and fared better at the ballot box.

In the UK, Corbyn’s ascent to the leadership of the Labour party in 2015 came rather spontaneously and unexpectedly (Maignashca & Dean, 2019) against the backdrop of the populist wave that engulfed Europe. This movement had commonalities with the Greek, Spanish, and the French cases, but also important differences, namely, that it was situated within the UK Labour party, which has been part and parcel of the very neoliberal political establishments the left populists were revolting against. Still, Corbyn’s rise has been treated largely as part of the family of the populist radical left. In comparison to the continental movements, which “exhibit populist characteristics more consistently”, Katsambekis & Kioupiolis (2019) regard Corbynism as a “borderline case” of populism, which shares significant affinities with other such movements, but is closer to mainstream social democracy, and “only strategically and occasionally making populist appeals.” Similarly, Venizelos and Stavrakakis (2022) also argue against a treatment of left populism as a monolithic category, but they do not view Corbynism as an exceptional case. They distinguish between different movements based on the degree to which they engage in populism and whether their left populism is of the “core/ agential/ strategic/ political” variety or the “peripheral /communicative /tactical /electoral” kind (p. 8). They place Corbynism in the latter category as they do SYRIZA, both of which, they contend, employed populism only ‘tactically’ and as part of a communication strategy, and they both lost their “agential dynamism” when they failed to take popular choices expressed through referenda seriously.

Regardless of these critiques, Corbynism, in both its emergence and demise, has been regarded by advocates and critics alike as a case of populism from the left—a universalization that arises from the conceptual imprecision of the term itself (Maignashca & Dean, 2019). In the mainstream and liberal context, Corbyn’s populism

was often painted in a negative, even derogatory, light. Corbyn himself was portrayed as an almost cult-like figure, waging a populist, and thereby illiberal and anti-democratic, war on the establishment (Stewart and Elgot, 2016; Dean, 2022; Venizelos, 2019; Rooksby, 2015). Populism, from this angle, falls within the “ideational” definition articulated by Cass Mudde (2004, as cited in Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2019). This approach sees populism as a “thin-centred ideology” or communicative style, which conceptualizes the society as antagonistically split between a moral ‘people’ and an unresponsive and out of touch ‘elite’ and calls on the former to rise against the latter (Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2019, p. 6). In the political science sphere, there are many examples of casting Corbynism in passing as an example of such a movement (Flinders, 2018; Hindmoor, 2018; Dorey & Denham, 2016). In one instance, Flinders (2018), while describing ‘the Corbyn effect’ in the 2017 General Election as the outcome of “the adoption of a populist strategy that sought to re-frame the Labour Party as a fresh, new, anti-political, anti-establishment ‘outsider’ party,” warns against the long term risks of “playing with populism”, and Hindmoor (2018), launching a similar critique against Corbynism, argues that the left needs to develop an intellectually coherent program rather than railing against “the bogeyman of neoliberalism” (Diamond, 2018). Leftwing populism interpreted in such a manner is seen as simply mirroring right populist tactics and ultimately not very distinct from right-wing populism, with equivalencies loosely drawn between Corbyn and Sanders on the one hand and Trump and Farage on the other. Even the centre-left *Guardian* has faced criticisms for indulging in a panic over the populist wave and in anti-Corbyn hostility (Burtenshaw & Jäger, 2018; Dean, 2022; Cook, 2019).

But while some of the most influential voices in the political mainstream painted populism as “a danger to the survival of democracy,” as Hamburger (2019) writes in *Jacobin*, for others, populism was “the key to democracy’s future.” The proponents of left populism saw this strategy as a necessary route to restoring democracy. Attributing the political crisis of representation to decades of neoliberal politics hollowing out the political and democratic institutions (Brown, 2015; Mouffe, 2018a), these movements were seen as capitalizing on the crisis to expand the majoritarian appeal of anti-austerity policies.

By the end of the decade, the continental left populism had come to pass, with Corbyn, propped up as he was by a mainstream party, the last man standing until the very last weeks of 2019. Even though at the time the temptation was to see this as a

sign of his relative success over his continental counterparts (Jäger, 2019), such illusions were shattered completely after his resignation at the end of 2019, following the party's disastrous performance in the 2019 General Election, the seismic proportions of which have been compared to its 1983 defeat that pushed the party into a lengthy retreat and recalibration. Regardless, the populist movements, Corbynism included, had episodic breakthroughs and long-lasting impacts which triggered a "major realignment" in national political landscapes (Katsambekis & Kioukiolis, 2019, p. 2).

Corbyn's Labour was projected to lose more than 100 seats in the 2017 General Election, but instead dramatically increased its seat numbers, shrunk Theresa May's majority, and forced her government into a coalition (Nunns, 2018). In retrospect, this proved to be a peak point for the movement rather than part of an upward trend which at the time appeared to be, but it was arguably no less significant for it. As equally historic as the party's 2019 defeat, Labour's 2017 election campaign featured a manifesto that was considered the party's most radical since 1945 and was celebrated as a vote winner for the party (Murray, 2019). Chantal Mouffe, a prominent theoretician of left populism, celebrated it as a victory for that conception of politics: Corbyn's Labour, which with 600,000 members by then was "the largest left-wing party in Europe" represented the successful implementation of a left populist strategy (Mouffe, 2018b). She attributed the victory to the energy of *Momentum's* grassroots campaigning and the manifesto's classic populist us vs them narrative with its "For the Many, Not the Few" slogan. The slogan, she wrote,

re-articulated an old Labour slogan, giving it a new content, through the drawing of a new political frontier, between an "Us" and a "Them". This involves the re-politicisation of public debate and the projection of an alternative to the neo-liberalism introduced by Margaret Thatcher, which was then followed and naturalized by Tony Blair.

Similarly inspired by this near victory, but more cautiously so, the Labour party's trade union official and Corbyn's advisor, Andrew Murray wrote in *Tribune* (2019):

The post-1979 consensus is over. The 2017 general election was, as Jeremy Corbyn said, 'the year politics caught up with 2008'. The economic impact of the crash had finally found an electoral expression. Since the shock of the 2017 election, undead neoliberalism has continued to wreak one misfortune after another in Britain. This is the twilight of Thatcherism, to give it the proper British name. But it is not ready to go quietly.

The events of the next two years, especially the impact of the Brexit-inspired right populism on the dissolution of Corbyn's 2017 coalition, proved that 'undead neoliberalism' was indeed far from ready to go. The end of the left populist experiment inspired many on the left to believe the terrain of populism was better relinquished to the right—that the left and populism could simply not mix. As Jäger (2019) wrote in *Jacobin* in his eulogy for continental left populism, these movements appeared “too ‘left’ to fully profit from the breakdown of the traditional party system, and too “populist” to answer key organizational questions.”

In this essay, I will trace the debates surrounding Corbynism's diametrically opposed performances in the General Elections of 2017 and 2019 and investigate the explanations given for the movement's demise in relation to its mixed approach to populism. Through this discussion, I will strive to highlight the ways in which the disagreements over left strategy, as they featured in Corbyn's 2019 defeat, are rooted ultimately in the indeterminate nature of the left's relationship with populism and with majoritarian politics more broadly.

Chapter 2. Framing the Politics of Corbynism

As discussed before, conceptualizing Corbynism as part of the left populist lineage is a contested issue. In addition to the reasons discussed earlier, Maignashca and Dean (2019) further argue that Corbynism cannot meaningfully be described as populist in Muddean sense, because it did not construct a clear antagonistic frontier between the people and the elite, nor did it mobilize a heterogeneous social bloc around a common identity or demand:

More commonly, in Corbyn's speeches, and in the discourses of Corbyn supporters, Corbyn's main constituency has typically been framed in terms of the 'movement' or 'the (Labour) party', rather than 'the people'. And the key ideas underpinning Corbynism are more to do with substantive moral and political values such as 'fairness', 'equality', and 'anti-austerity' (Dean, 2023a, p. 6).

Furthermore, the Laclauian definition also does not apply, according to them. Drawing on Arditi's critique of Laclau (2004, as cited in Dean, 2023a), Dean notes that there is a slippage in Laclau's definition between populism as a particular mode of politics and as equivalent with 'the political'. Under the former configuration, Dean argues, Corbynism cannot meaningfully be cast as 'populist' for the same reasons discussed in reference to the ideational approach, and in the latter case the description is too broad to offer a meaningful distinction (p. 6). Accordingly, some have opted to categorize Corbynism irrespective of any populist orientation as part of the distinct lineage of the UK left. Maignashca and Dean (2019) describe Corbynism as a resurgence of an established tradition of left politics in the UK, one that "combines an economic left Keynesianism with the active promotion of an anti-war stance internationally, and a commitment to greater democratisation within the Labour Party" (p. 163). Bassett (2019, as cited in Maignashca & Dean, 2019) describes it as a convergence between the post-war New Left, and a left-wing strand of parliamentary social democracy, both of which are historically influential traditions within the Labour party.

Still, Corbynism's populist association cannot be easily cast off, since not just its 2017 surge, as noted earlier, but also its subsequent demise have been engaged with through the catch-all prism of left populism and as part of the rise and fall of the populist left. Moreover, debates over left strategy often involve both proponents and opponents

of populism treating Corbynism as another variation of the European left populist wave (Venizelos & Stavrakakis, 2020; Smith, 2020; Jäger, 2019).

Such manners of engaging with populism can be seen as pitfalls of what Maiguashca & Dean critique as the “descriptor” model of populism, which, including both Muddean and Laclauian definitions. Within this approach, they argue that in the current political climate where appeals to ‘the people’ have become part of the political fashion, populism as a resurgent phenomenon would be presumed to be expressing itself to varying degrees in all political contexts (p. 160).

Attempts at investigating a political movement or discourse based on minimalistic definitions of populism gives rise to what they refer to as a “degreeist” approach, which assesses the degree to which a political context adheres to descriptions of populism. As Stavrakakis et al., who are proponents of this approach, clarify, this model is concerned with “highlighting a specific pattern of articulation, in distinguishing on that basis what is populist from what is not, but also what is less from what is more populist.” (2017, p. 14, cited in Maiguashca & Dean, 2019)

Arguing for more theoretical rigour and resistance to this universalizing impulse, Maiguashca & Dean advocate instead for

a thick conception of populism, one which posits populism as a distinctive, *sui generis* mode of oppositional politics, which goes far beyond rhetorical appeals to ‘the people’ and/or a hated elite, regardless of whether these are conceived as central nodal points (Laclau) or as key elements in an ideology (Mudde). (2019, p. 160)

In the absence of such fuller conceptions of populism, others have relied on a Gramscian lens to conceptualize what is observed outwardly as populist dynamics of these movements. As such, Worth (2019) interprets Corbynism’s strategy via the Gramscian notion of the ‘national-popular’ and as advancing a war of position against the neoliberal common sense. He describes Corbynism loosely through its disparate traits as “a collection of movements and parties geared towards contesting the post-crisis policies of austerity and look towards moving beyond the neoliberal system”. He further highlights traits such as an emphasis on “grassroot support, the use of social media, the move towards engaging with popular slogans (whether ‘populist’ or not) and a general appeal to a younger generation” (p.493).

Through such readings the notion of the “popular” as opposed to “populist”, operationalized through the works of Stuart Hall on popular culture emerges as a more effective concept. Drawing from Hall, Ward & Guglielmo (2022) dub Corbynism as “pop-socialism”, described as a new form of radical politics that combines “popular-democratic appeals to the ‘people’ with the traditional class-based demands of democratic socialism”. Dean, in more recent work, also draws from Hall to articulate a fuller conception of populism vis-à-vis Corbynism through the lens of the movement’s engagement with the terrain of popular culture. He dubs Corbynism’s brand of populism a form of “popular leftism” (2023a), a distinction that highlights the cultural milieu formed around Corbyn in the 2015-2019 year as central to its outwardly populist leanings.

Dean’s ‘popular leftism’ as a political tendency is distinguished from the Laclauian left populism by its preference toward a cultural expression of left politics and engaging in political struggle within the terrain of popular culture. It describes a political and cultural resurgence of the left identity expressed through a distinct generational character as it coincided with the coming of age of a generation that gained political consciousness during the post-2008 years—the “Generation Left” as dubbed by Milburn (2019). At the level of transnational politics, popular leftism involved left politics moving out of the margins and into the mainstream, and as such contrasted with the predominance of “folk politics” (Srnicek & Williams, 2016, as cited in Dean, 2023a) in the 2008-2015 era, characterized as radicalism directed at the local and communal levels and skeptical of the political mainstream and electoral politics.

Dean’s conceptualization of popular leftism is inspired by Banet-Weiser’s and other critical feminist scholars’ discussion of the contemporary phenomenon of “popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, as cited in Dean, 2023a), which in turn is influenced by Stuart Hall’s articulation of “the popular” as a terrain of class struggle underpinned by the persistent dialectic of “containment and resistance” (1998). Dean argues that the cultural mediation of the political inherent to this tendency places it into a dual relationship with neoliberalism, as “a (potentially) counter-hegemonic cultural and political formation (albeit perhaps quite a loose one) that aims to challenge neoliberalism” while at the same time being subject to and reproducing a number of neoliberal logics (p. 9).

While this mode of politics can be shown to have been a strong influence on Corbynism, Dean clarifies that it was not synonymous with it. He traces the lineage of

popular leftism to the cultural resistance prevalent in the music scene of the 70s and the 80s and identifies episodic displays of it in the pre-Corbyn era, particularly under Milliband. These tendencies consolidated subsequently during the Corbyn years, “such that the years 2015–2019 marked a reconstitution of left politics’ status, impact and visibility within mainstream politics, culture, and public life” (2023a, p. 9). In what follows, I will briefly review and elaborate on some of the key features of the left-wing cultural milieu around Corbyn which Dean recasts as aspects of its popular leftism.

The Corbyn era was marked by an increased visibility and presence of left politics. Corbynism gave rise to a newly found celebrity status among a cohort of left-wing commentators (p. 10). The centre-left outlets of *Guardian* and *New Statesman* regularly hosted more radical left voices during this period. Accordingly, voices such as that of Owen Jones, a self-identified radical leftist columnist at *Guardian* were privileged and elevated to the status of prominent left-wing cultural figures (p. 10). This happened despite these outlets’ overall unease, as noted earlier, toward the populist and radical nature of Corbyn’s movement. TV and mainstream media also regularly featured radical left-wing voices during this period. One famous instance was of the *Novara* media co-host, Ash Sarkar’s appearance on *Good Morning Britain* which went viral after Sarkar called Piers Morgan “an idiot” during live broadcast, for accusing her of supporting Obama. Exclaiming the absurdity of Morgan’s accusation, she retorted: “I’m literally a Communist” (ITV News, 2018). The clip of the interaction quickly reached more than 6 million views on the *Novara* YouTube channel, resulting in her being subsequently featured on *Teen Vogue* (Diavolo, 2018), and questions being raised more broadly as to whether Communism was ‘cool’ now and ‘literally’ back. Her retort was later turned into a *Novara* slogan and printed and sold on their merchandise (Novara Media, 2018; Philips, 2018; Jones, 2018).

More broadly during this period a greater porousness emerged between the worlds of politics and popular entertainment, visible also in the trend of superstar musicians such as Dua Lipa and Ed Sheeran endorsing Jeremy Corbyn, with Corbyn himself making an appearance at the Glastonbury festival, and as well, of mainstream musicians and other cultural icons openly identifying as socialists (Dean, 2023a, p. 10). Dean also recounts examples from the world of TV drama evident of the further encroachment of left-wing sensibilities into the world of mainstream TV, and popular and corporate entertainment.

Another crucial development of this period, with important consequences for left politics, was “the rise of a lively ecosystem of left-wing alternative media” (Dean, 2023a, p. 11) and a flourishing of independent left and socialist outlets which sought to counter the mainstream anti-left and anti-Corbyn bias (Chakelian, 2017). A report by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism shows the impact of alternative news providers in the UK, including Pro-Corbyn left-leaning news and commentary platforms such as *The Canary*, *Evolve Politics*, *Novara Media*, and *Skwawkbox* increased their visibility and reach during the Corbyn era. Their impact has especially grown during election periods, reaching millions of users online and on social media—an effect that has been attributed to a loss of trust in the national and mainstream media (Newman et al. 2020; Cushion, 2020). Clarke-Ezzidio (2021) writes in *New Statesman*:

Over the past ten years, a wave of platforms such as the *Canary* (founded in 2015), *Evolve Politics* (2015), *Novara Media* (2011), *Skwawkbox* (2012) and *Another Angry Voice* (2010) have identified a radical left-shaped hole in the media landscape. Many of these built on audiences inspired by Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party. Cumulatively, these outlets have 1.4 million followers across all major social media channels (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube).

These outlets were often directly supported by the party leadership. One of the largest and most successful of these ventures is *Novara media*, co-founded in 2011 by Aaron Bastani and James Butler, who have their roots in student politics. *Novara*, which at its inception harboured hostility and skepticism toward the Labour party, supported Corbyn’s leadership bid and launched a series of interviews with Corbyn and his allies at critical times during the leadership race (Chakelian, 2017). After Labour’s 2017 surge, *Novara* and other so-called ‘DIY’ outlets were identified by *Guardian* as a “new force shaping the election debate” (Booth, 2017). Through their association with the Labour party, these outlets managed to venture into the terrain of mass politics and find a chance at successfully growing their audience. Their growth also contributed to intra-left debates over strategy and policies becoming more abundant and animated than in recent history, grounded in the real possibility of a Corbyn government. *Novara media*, which hosted a series of debates on Brexit between 2016 and 2019 from a left perspective, embodied the convergence that was characteristic of this era among diverse left factions, with the two co-founders representing both sides of the Brexit divide (Bastani, 2016; Butler, 2016).

In what follows, I will piece together a narrative of Corbynism’s rise and fall centred on the way Brexit featured into and impacted it, and drawing on a range of positions advanced in scholarly journals and by Corbyn’s advisors and campaign operatives as well as prominent left-wing voices within this cultural milieu, published in *Guardian* and *New Statesman* or in popular left outlets such as *New Left Review*, *Jacobin*, its UK affiliate, *Tribune*, its scholarly subsidiary *Catalyst*, but also other smaller outlets, I will reflect on the various explanations provided for the 2017 near-victory and the 2019 disastrous defeat. I will offer analysis as to the degree to which Corbynism’s divergent performances in 2017 and 2019 can be assessed through the lens of left populism, by relying on the “descriptor” model of populism. I will subsequently operationalize Maignashca and Dean’s critique of ‘thin conceptions’ of populism to highlight the limitations of the descriptor model and point in the direction of alternative assessments of Corbynism’s politics and legacy that can offer coherent explanations of both its successes and failures.

Chapter 3. Corbynism Through the Years

3.1. 2017: Many Against the Few

In the period after the referendum, a consensus emerged across centre and the left regarding Brexit: to reject the hard Tory Brexit and Theresa May's slogan of "no deal is better than a bad deal", and counter it with a soft and sensible Brexit. Given the slim majority for Leave, and the Leave campaign's systematic misrepresentation of facts and reported instances of cheating, Labour and other pro-Remain parties could have chosen to challenge the legitimacy of the referendum, but they decided to abide by the outcome. Inside the Labour party too, the right and the left factions agreed that it behooved the party to respect the vote and focus on the terms of the implementation (Umunna & Steering, 2017; Jones, 2017). They decided to focus on pushing to remain in the Customs Union and maintain a close relationship with the Single Market (Gough, 2020). For Labour, this was predominantly informed by the sharp divide in its base, especially between the membership and the party's broader base of support: While over two-thirds of Labour membership were pro-Remain, two-thirds of Labour's seats were in pro-Leave areas (Hanretty, 2017), with some of the most strongly pro-Leave and strongly pro-Remain seats both having Labour MPs (Gough, 2020).

As such, they placed a strong emphasis in the 2017 manifesto on retaining the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union as well as jobs and living standards, as opposed to the right-wing Brexiters' priority of putting the greatest possible distance between the UK and the EU. The 2017 Labour manifesto tried to "shift the political focus away from Britain's relationship with the EU" (Finn, 2019, p. 18) and toward the party's program of anti-austerity. As well, despite accepting to end the freedom of movement, the manifesto did not shy away from signaling Labour's objection to it:

In trade negotiations our priorities favour growth, jobs and prosperity. We make no apologies for putting these aims before bogus immigration targets. Freedom of movement will end when we leave the European Union. Britain's immigration system will change, but Labour will not scapegoat migrants nor blame them for economic failures. (Labour Party, 2017, p.28)

Despite Corbyn receiving flak from the Labour right for this electorally unfavourable position (Finn, 2019), this strategy of compromise on a soft Brexit without

compromising on principles paid off for Labour. It allowed them to avoid alienating two-thirds of their base, which challenging the referendum result would have done, focus on keeping Brexit's economic disruptions to a minimum and for a sensible immigration policy post-Brexit. With this strategy Labour was able to contain the threat of polarization Brexit posed to its base and stay united against austerity with the populist messaging of "For the Many Not the Few". Consequently, Labour under Corbyn outperformed expectations and gained 30 seats (one of the largest gains since Blair). The 2017 manifesto and the party's Brexit position should be acknowledged as the closest that Labour ever got to diminishing the impact of Brexit's culture war on its base and striking a balance between the demands of the Leave and Remain voters through appeals to an economic common ground. This is a strategy consistent with Mouffe's articulation of left populism, which contends that cultural divides stoked by the right can be won by appeals to an economic common ground and that communities recruited to the right-wing populist cause must be reached out to through such appeals and won back (2018b). Meanwhile, critics of this strategy maintain that this is an impractical goal since such voters are not motivated by the values that the left champions and are mobilized by perceptions of personal gain or loss and by resentment over justice and equality (Hamburger, 2018).

A closer look at the factors contributing to Corbyn's success can demonstrate merit to both sides of the debate as Labour's 2017 Brexit strategy, and by extension its electoral success, were arguably only practical within the broader political dynamics of 2017. I will explore some of the factors contributing to this dynamic next.

One factor was all the main parties having accepted at the time that Britain was going to leave the EU. This aligned with the popular mood: YouGov wrote at the time of "re-leavers", and that the real size of the pro-Leave electorate should be considered 68% (Roberts & Curtis, 2017). According to one poll in May 2017, only twenty two percent of voters wanted politicians to "ignore or overturn the referendum result" (Finn, 2019). Heath and Goodwin's (2017) empirical analysis shows that Labour's success was partly due to a consolidation around the two major parties, and a collapse of third parties. Thirty percent of 2015 Liberal Democrat voters and sixteen percent of UKIP voters supported Labour in 2017. Labour also picked up several seats from the SNP in Scotland. Were it not for the elimination of other options on Brexit, leaving just the hard

Tory Brexit and the soft Labour Brexit on the table, Labour would not have been able to pick up as much of the Remain vote as it did.

A second factor was Conservative underperformance. May initially enjoyed high ratings in the polls, even as the election was called in the Spring of 2017. Part of this popularity, Heath and Goodwin (2017) argue, was rooted in her party's investment in rebuilding links with blue-collar Britain (p. 347). This was not so much an economic strategy, as it was a cultural strategy designed to combine social care packages with an anti-elitist rhetoric while catering to the presumed social conservatism of Labour voting blue-collar areas—a strategy that under Miliband and his appointment of Maurice Glasman to the task of reconnecting with Labour's traditional bases with the goal of stopping their defection to UKIP, came to be known as the "Blue Labour project". (Wright, 2017) Heath and Goodwin characterize May's electoral strategy in 2017 as essentially "the opposite bet to that which had been placed by Tony Blair and New Labour more than twenty years earlier":

Whereas Blair and Co. had gambled that they could retain support from their traditional blue-collar and socially conservative workers while reaching into the more liberal, urban and university-educated middle-classes, May and her team gambled that they could retain support from the more middle-class and pro-remain wing of the Conservative party while reaching into the more pro-Brexit, left behind and Labour areas of the country. (Heath and Goodwin, 2017, p. 357)

However, a successful execution of such a strategy for the Conservative party entailed an artful flipping of the script that could only deliver results if performed convincingly—as Thatcher had done decades ago. May received a record high vote share in 2017, but still could not overtake Corbyn's rise. It is debatable to what extent this should be attributed to May's failed populist performance and to Corbyn's successful one, but no doubt both played a role as May's campaign had a few stumbles rolling out her policy proposals and inevitably her polling significantly dropped closer to the election (Asthana & Elgot, 2017). Corbyn's ratings were significantly improving in the meantime. According to YouGov, forty-eight percent of those asked thought the Labour leader had a good campaign, while for May this number was only twenty percent (2017, as cited in Heath and Goodwin, 2017). Eventually, having begun campaigning 20 points behind the Conservatives in the poll, Corbyn astonished commentators by winning 40 percent of the

votes, which the BBC referred to as the largest increase in the share of the vote by a Labour leader since Clement Attlee in 1945 (Landale, 2017).

An additional factor was that in the lead up to the election, the Manchester terror attack overshadowed Brexit. This event ended up being one of the highlights of Corbyn's tenure. His anti-imperialist speech managed to shift the public discourse away from the usual rhetoric of blaming immigrants and demanding increased policing and tightened border security, toward a criticism of Britain's foreign policy and austerity politics. Much to the dismay of the Blairite Labour MPs, who objected to Corbyn's radical response and preferred him to blame immigrants "as normal people would do" (Finn, 2020; Bastani, 2020), polling showed that a majority agreed with Corbyn's remarks on the root causes of terror attacks, with 53 percent agreeing with the statement that "wars the UK has supported or fought are responsible, at least in part, for terror attacks against our country", and only twenty-four percent disagreed (Smith, 2017).

While some have resorted to reading Labour's success as a Conservative underperformance and a convergence of the 'remain backlash' around Labour, Labour preserving a majority of its pro-Leave seats was also a notable aspect of the 2017 outcome—despite Labour's advocacy for a soft Brexit and Corbyn openly opposing a stringent immigration policy. In terms of popular vote share, an Ipsos MORI poll reported twenty-four percent of Leavers voting for Labour (2017). Since initially, it was no more than approximately thirty percent of Leave voters who favoured Labour, their defection to Tories was only marginal in 2017 with Labour losing a total of six seats. Heath and Goodwin's use of Hanretty's mapping of the Brexit vote onto Westminster seats (Hanretty, 2016; Hanretty, 2017) to demonstrate that in 2017 higher support for Leave did not necessarily translate to changing support to Conservatives and that Labour's share of vote was seen to increase even in places that voted Leave. Heath and Goodwin's empirical analysis concludes that "Labour managed to attract a broad coalition of support, and one that was not especially socially distinctive" (p. 350), despite the overall trend being one of Tories losing votes in the pro-Remain areas and gaining in "very pro-leave" areas:

...somewhat surprisingly the pattern of changes in support for Labour is not nearly as polarised [as Tories] along social or political lines. The correlations are generally much weaker, which indicates that there is not

such a clear structure to the places where Corbyn and Labour tended to perform particularly well or badly. (p. 350)

Overall, the 2017 election outcome demonstrates that Corbyn's campaign, which primarily was propped up by a soft Brexit policy popular across the political spectrum, and secondarily gathered momentum by utilizing a populist communication strategy of "many vs the few" with attacks on the establishment, including criticism of British foreign policy of war on terror that has traditionally been supported by both parties, was able to overshadow not just the nationalist populism of Brexit but also May's attempted populism of a vaguely social democratic nature.

3.2. 2017-2019: Rise of 'the People's Vote'

As observed in the previous section, an important factor facilitating Labour's surge in 2017 was the consensus across the political spectrum on accepting the referendum results. Britain was on track for an exit, which consoled Leave voters enough to not have to turn out as much (Hanretty, 2017). And for those voters wanting to register their objection to the outcome or the process, the only sensible option on offer among all non-Tory parties was Labour's soft Brexit. But this landscape shifted drastically in the period between 2017 and 2019 as the consensus among the centre and left started to wane. Paradoxically, Labour's success in 2017 had a lot to do with what came next.

In the immediate aftermath of the EU referendum, advocating for a second vote was deeply unpopular and those who did so reported receiving a lot of hostility (Cohen, 2019). Politically, in 2016 and 2017 this position was marginalized with very few politicians willing to throw their weight behind it. Even the Blairite faction of the PLP, who had accused Corbyn of undermining the Remain campaign by refusing to join forces with Cameron (Freedland, 2016; Kuenssberg, 2016), and later aligned themselves with the movement for a second referendum, before 2017 were unwilling to advocate for it. Labour's staunchly anti-Corbyn deputy leader, Tom Watson, reportedly mocked the Liberal Democrats advocating for a second referendum as "Brexit deniers", emphasizing that Labour "would never ignore the democratic will of the British people" (LabourList, 2016). And Yvette Cooper, another voice of the second referendum, in 2017 had compared the Labour MPs who intended to vote against triggering Article 50 to Donald Trump (Merrick, 2017). But post-2017, May's reduced majority had weakened the position of her government with respect to EU negotiations, exacerbated the Tories

internal conflict over Brexit, and prolonged the state of uncertainty Britain found itself in. Her government was saddled with the impossible task of appeasing the contradictory demands of her DUP coalition partners and her hard-Brexit Tory colleagues, especially on the question of Northern Ireland (Finn, 2021). The prolonging of the Brexit crisis was a boon to the anti-Brexit centre, who was emboldened by these conditions to organize its opposition to Brexit.

In an in-depth take in *Guardian*, Cohen (2019) chronicles the emergence of a movement of hard Remainers during this period, dubbing it as a movement of *Remainism*, with the goal of pulling the plug on negotiations and stopping Brexit at all costs. The main organizational vehicle behind this movement was the People's Vote (PV)—a name that soon became a “byword for resistance to Brexit” (Cohen, 2019)—, a private campaigning organization founded by the millionaire businessman and corporate PR guru Roland Rudd who had ties to the Blairite faction in the Labour party (Finn, 2019). Cohen's profile of the people who attended PV's rallies in 2018 and 2019 (and those organized by smaller anti-Brexit organizations) reveals that many were apolitical before Brexit, though they were comforted with a general sense that “the world had been marching forward, and things were getting better incrementally”. There is, in these testimonies, an unspoken desire to return to “the good old days” before the ‘madness’ of Brexit and to a world where reasonable politicians and bureaucrats could be trusted to keep the country on track. One protestor carrying a ‘Led by Donkeys’ placard tells Cohen:

I'd been fairly apolitical throughout my life, just letting them get on with it as long as the country was run in a reasonably sensible manner. And it's only the craziness of Brexit that's made me mad.

Cohen writes that Remainers often

...put their faith not in politicians, but in bureaucrats and civil servants. [...] [They] wish these kinds of ‘grownups’ – seemingly responsible, competent people, capable of putting the national interest above ambition and petty rivalries – could clean up the mess. This is a vision, however fanciful, of politics without politicking. Once the grownups come to the rescue, it suggests, the rest of us can retreat, safe in the knowledge that everything is under control. Remainists look enviously at Europe, longing for a leader of their own – a Merkel, a Macron, a Tusk – to deliver Britain from Brexit.

Notably, this sense of trust, or the desire to regain trust, in the establishment was sharply at odds with the backdrop of crisis in political representation, and with the trend of lost trust in the mainstream media and the political establishment—factors that as discussed at the outset had largely contributed to the rise of populist politics. The mode of politics that the voice of *Remainism* expressed, especially the nostalgia for the pre-Brexit status quo and the trust in the establishment, share characteristics with the Blairite response to Corbyn which Dean in recent works (2022) analyzes as a mode of politics that constitutes anti-populism.

Nonetheless, with the tireless campaigning and lobbying of the People’s Vote for the centre and the left parties to oppose Brexit in any form and not just the hard Brexit of the Conservatives, Cohen (2019) argues that by 2019 they helped set “the new conventional wisdom that Labour faces electoral wipeout if it doesn’t commit to a second referendum”. Consequently, those Labour politicians who previously thought it unthinkable to try and stop Brexit, by 2018 were advocating for it in full force. Tom Watson, a leading voice of anti-Corbynism in the Labour party (Finn, 2019), was also most vocal, according to Poggrund and Maguire (2021) in pushing the limits of Labour’s Brexit policy to extents that appeared electorally impractical at the time. Labour’s anti-Brexit turn began in earnest with the 2018 party conference, where the leadership agreed to a policy that tied the fate of Labour’s Brexit policy to the Tory government’s Brexit negotiations. Keir Starmer, then Corbyn’s shadow Brexit secretary, and later widely regarded as the ‘architect’ of Labour’s second referendum policy, delivered a rousing speech at the 2018 Labour conference, demanding that Labour keep Remain as an option, to a standing ovation from the room (Reuters, 2018). Ultimately, it was Britain’s inevitable participation in the EU parliament election of early 2019, a by-product of the prolonging of negotiations, and Labour’s poor performance in those elections that pushed the leadership to surrender to the call for a second referendum.⁶

3.3. 2019: A Brexit Election

If 2017 was the party’s strongest showing since 1945, the 2019 defeat has been compared in historic significance to the 1983 defeat. A majority of the seats that Labour

⁶ In an election with turnouts below 40 percent, Labour came in third with only 14 percent while the combined vote share of the hard-remain camp was 36 percent. (Finn, 2021)

lost were in the constituencies of North and Midlands: the formerly industrialized areas that the Labour party originated from but have been progressively turning blue since the Blairite turn in the party. Still, some of the seats that were lost in 2019 were voting Conservative for the first time since the formation of the electoral seat.

But the loss was not just in the North. If Labour's surge in 2017 was achieved on the bedrocks of a broad-based coalition and votes that were picked up across the Brexit divide, 2019 was a reversal of that trend with Labour losing votes on both sides of Brexit. Compared to 2017, in net terms, Labour lost around 1.7 million Leave voters and around 1 million Remain voters, but the majority of seats lost were in Leave areas and among Labour's deindustrialized base, often loosely referred to as its "working class" communities. According to the party's own election post-mortem:

1. Labour lost votes across every region and country in the UK;
2. Labour's vote share declined most in small, medium, and large towns, but consolidated in cities;
3. Labour lost support amongst all classes but amongst working class communities the most. (Labour Together, 2020)

Opinion polls in several key Labour constituencies in England and Wales revealed that people voted for parties other than Labour, or abstained, for three main reasons:

- (i) support for Brexit, and a wish to 'get it done';
- (ii) contempt for, or hatred of, Jeremy Corbyn;
- (iii) being unconvinced of the feasibility of Labour's economic programme. (Helm, 2019, as cited in Gough, 2020)

The party's post-mortem report similarly echoes these factors as part of a broad consensus across the party that "a combination of concerns about the leadership, Labour's position on Brexit, and our policy programme" were responsible for Labour's defeat (Labour Together, 2020, p. 3). Upon closer investigation Brexit can be seen as the underlying factor behind the other two factors: A YouGov poll shows that perceptions of Brexit indecision were behind negative views of Labour party in 2019. 43 percent of survey respondents cited Brexit-related reasons for no longer supporting Corbyn in 2019, with 24 percent citing reasons that had to do with perceptions of Corbyn as weak and indecisive (Curtis, 2019).

With the growth of the negative perceptions of Labour, which the hostile media no doubt contributed to (Cook, 2019), Conservative tactics that Labour had successfully thwarted in 2017, proved effective in 2019. *SkyNews* journalist Lewis Goodall had reported in 2017 upon a trip to the West Heath district of Birmingham that “Conservative overtures to this bit of the Midlands working class were failing, or at least, not succeeding enough,” above all because “the Tory attempt to link [Labour] with any kind of Brexit reversal had manifestly failed.” But when he returned in 2019, the mood had changed: “Labour has become associated with attempts to block or reverse our leaving the EU” (Goodall, 2019b). Rather than achieving the goal of stopping Brexit, the second referendum policy appeared to have helped Johnson’s message of “Get Brexit Done” to resonate with a broader range of voters.

The anecdotal accounts of Labour canvassers, journalists, and other commentators from Labour’s pro-Leave areas during the election period echoed a prevailing sense of being taken for granted and talked down to among these communities, and a disillusionment and weariness with the political process (Clyne, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Gough (2020) frames this reaction as such:

The proposed second referendum was seen as Labour abandoning its commitment to Brexit. Over three years people’s reasons for voting for Brexit had remained largely unchallenged. Moreover, the vote for Brexit became a thing in itself, independent of its original motivations or content: this was the only time that voters had been consulted on such a major issue, so disregarding their view was insulting. (p.18)

This was an emotional reaction, which arguably had less to do with Brexit per se, and more with chronic feelings of disenfranchisement and distrust in the political establishment—i.e., the same crisis of representation that had fueled the rise of populist politics in the first place. But now Labour was once again being associated with the same political establishment which it had taken upon itself to challenge. Shenker (2019) wrote in *Vice* on the eve of the election:

At this election, the two major parties have very different visions of how to deal with the legacy of deindustrialisation and late capitalism’s intense regional inequalities, and the ideological gulf between them is enormous. Yet many of those same voters dismiss [Labour campaigners] with a weary refrain of ‘they’re all the same’ or ‘I want nothing to do with it.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that the move to the second referendum was at the core of Labour's disastrous performance in 2019. Party staffers interviewed in *This Land* (Jones, 2020), and *Left Out* (Pogrund and Maguire, 2020), two of the major journalistic accounts of the Corbyn era that have come out since the defeat, reportedly echoed the sense of regret about the switch to the second referendum policy, wondering if "a clearer position after 2017 – accepting the referendum result, acknowledging the membership's unease, backing a soft Brexit – might have yielded a way forward" (Butler, 2020).

While to some, the second referendum had come out of a cynical pressure campaign from the Labour Right, intent on breaking the coalition behind Corbyn and ousting him regardless of the consequences (Finn, 2021), the party's own post-mortem emphasized the historical trajectories and a continuation of Blairite trends informing the loss of seats in the North and the Midlands (Labour Together, 2020). Some further argued that Labour's inability to anticipate the catastrophic impact of the supposed compromise policy of a second referendum betrayed the blind spots of the coalition behind Corbyn, "arisen from the three main leaders of the party being London MPs, but more importantly from the party membership being sparse in the Midlands and North outside of the large cities." (Gough, 2020, p. 18) Still, others pointed to Labour's strong performance in the metropolitan and pro-Remain areas and the UK's problematic First-Past-the-Post system, arguing that there was no path to victory for Corbyn in 2019 and that backing Remain was Labour's only sensible choice.

I will review these positions in the next chapter.

Chapter 4. Reactions and Analysis

4.1. A Right-Wing Sabotage

After Corbyn's defeat, many left and centre-left commentators, including journalists Pogrud and Maguire in their book about the Corbyn era, *Left Out* (2021), focused on the Labour Right's treatment of Corbyn as one of the key factors of Corbyn's defeat. Backing the second referendum is considered in these accounts an unthinkable position that the right-wing faction pressured Corbyn into adopting. Daniel Finn, a board member of *New Left Review* and a regular contributor to *Jacobin*, also chronicles the internal party events during this time (2019; 2021) highlighting the flip-flopping of the centrist MPs on Brexit and their factional antagonism to Corbyn. Finn provides copious evidence to argue that for the Labour Right the strategy of second referendum served primarily as a factional weapon against Corbyn and was less about avoiding the worst of Brexit.

Finn contends the only way to make sense of the actions of the Tories and the Labour right during this period is to understand that a bad Brexit deal, with all its ramifications for the country, was a price the establishment parties were willing to pay to thwart a serious threat to their political interests, especially after Corbynism's surprise surge in 2017. The Labour leadership, he further argues, made the mistake of underestimating the length the Right was willing to go to, vis-à-vis Brexit especially, to quash an ideological challenge to the neoliberal common sense, as they operated under the tacit assumption that "big capital would step in to impose some discipline on its traditional party" (2019, p. 26). Leftist academic and co-host on *Novara*, Jeremy Gilbert, writes (2019) in *openDemocracy* on the motivations of the Labour right in the context of internal party divisions that:

The clearest way of understanding their position is in basic Marxist terms. They are the section of the party that is ultimately allied to the interests of capital. Some may advocate for social reform and for some measure of redistribution, some may dislike the nationalism and endemic snobbery of the Tories more than others; but they will all ruthlessly oppose any attempt to limit or oppose the power of capital and those who hold it.

From this perspective, the external and internal pressures around Brexit that were deliberately placed on Corbyn worked in tandem to cause the 2019 electoral

breakdown. Externally, Tories, with their maximally ideological approach to Brexit, toxic internal divides, and one-upmanship to adopt the most anti-EU rhetoric – courting the most hardened and ideologically driven of Leave voters and pursuing a hard exit no matter the costs – turned Brexit into a much greater crisis for the country than it had to be. Internally, the Labour Right used every opportunity it could to agitate against Corbyn and weaken his position—a strategy that worked in favour of the Conservatives every time. Eventually, through the vehicle of the People’s Vote, they managed to steer Labour toward an electorally disadvantageous position on Brexit, which was arguably a key reason for Labour’s defeat. Many pro-Corbyn commentators who were outraged by the disproportionate media attacks and by Labour Right’s hostility and treatment of Corbyn as “an illegitimate usurper” (Finn, 2019, p.11), converged in their reactions to the defeat around a condemnation of the media attacks, the Labour Right’s toxic obsession with ousting Corbyn, and the People’s Vote cynical and disingenuous campaign to push Corbyn into an untenable Brexit position (Bastani, 2020; Watkins, 2020; Cook, 2019; Finn, 2021).

Regarding the adoption of the second referendum, Finn writes that the ‘hard Remainers’ behind the People’s Vote campaign were set on forcing a choice and eliminating the middle ground on Brexit. Even though in early 2019 the Corbyn team came up with a soft-Brexit alternative proposal to May’s deal, the so-called “Norway Plus” model, which would have minimized disruptions to the country’s economy and avoided the need for a second referendum, the People’s Vote campaign refused to back it. During this time, notably, soft-Brexit was polling the highest among the electorate. It was the “least unpopular” option and where public opinion was “least divided” according to polls (Pagel, 2019).

Pushing Labour to adopt the unpopular position of a second referendum was “a high-risk strategy with a strong possibility of failure,” Finn writes, especially for “anyone in British public life who wanted to avoid the worst potential consequences of Brexit” (2021, p. 135). He notes that while traditionally, in cases of a divergence of opinion between Labour voters and members, Labour Right would opt for a compromise in favour of electability, under Corbyn, they argued that the will of the membership should prevail above all, regardless of electoral risks. *Guardian’s* leading columnists, he writes, followed suit in shaming Labour for its “lack of ideological purity”, despite having for years presented “electoral pragmatism as the supreme political virtue” (2019, p. 28).

Ultimately, Labour was urged “by friend and foe alike” to adopt a goal that was “neither more desirable nor even more achievable than its previous stance, in the name of avoiding electoral meltdown” (p. 32).

While the broader Remain constituency was naturally concerned with the outcome of Brexit negotiations under Tory leadership, “the Blairite holdovers,” Finn writes, “like Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell who dominated the leadership of the People’s Vote campaign”, worked to skew its political orientation and pushed it toward “a cynical maximalist line”, which would be electorally impossible for Labour (2019, p. 27-28). Other journalists have also offered similar pictures from the inner workings of the People’s Vote campaign and its warped priorities, due to being dominated by anti-Corbyn “ex-Labour spinners” (Pogrund & Maguire, 2021; Bienkov & Payne, 2019). Finn argues:

We should not imagine that this prospect [of pushing Labour toward defeat] was unwelcome for the People’s Vote leadership. [...] The campaign relied upon an army of sincere foot soldiers to populate its demonstrations, but its inner core was strictly Machiavellian [...] these were the people who called the shots throughout 2019. (2021, p. 134). [...] Those who wanted to maintain the ‘entrenched power of a privileged elite’ used Brexit to beat back an unexpected challenge. Whether they attached Leave or Remain labels to their political clothing, they were clearly delighted with the outcome. (2021, p. 154)

After Labour adopted the second referendum policy, the PV leadership still pretended that it had not happened (Goodall, 2019a) and refused to support Labour in the election. Roland Rudd shut down the People’s Vote overnight, refusing to allow its resources to be used in support of Labour (Fletcher, 2019). Finally, with the Right consolidating against Corbyn, and the Labour Right imposing a split on Corbyn’s base, pitting Labour members against Labour voters, Finn writes, Labour was completely beaten out of shape and the job of throwing the body over was left to Johnson and his performance.

While there is a lot of evidence, as presented in this section, that the People’s Votes and the Blairite faction’s backing of the second referendum was a cynical campaign with the goal not of stopping Brexit but of ousting Corbyn, the left narrative of blaming the media and the Labour Right for Corbyn’s defeat uncovers key underlying dynamics, but ultimately lacks in explanatory power. Notably, Finn himself notes similar

media attacks and internal factional battles in 2017 not only failed to weaken Corbyn's campaign but also led to criticisms of bias within the mainstream media (Finn, 2019). An exploration of the broader political context in 2019 and the composition of factions and forces within Corbyn's base is needed to shine a light on why the same tactics that failed to stop Corbyn's movement in 2017 succeeded in 2019.

4.2. From Bennism to Blairism

The Labour party's internal conflicts, though an outstanding feature of the Corbyn era, cannot be easily reduced to a Blairites against the Corbynists narrative, or decoupled from the distinct history of the evolution of left politics within the Labour party. To gain a clearer understanding of this relationship and how the second referendum policy came to be, it is important to understand the characteristics of the heterogenous factions that constituted Corbynism.

While many, including Mouffe (2018), celebrated the rise of Corbynism as an end to Blairism, it can be argued that Corbynism constituted both a continuity and a break with the Labour party politics prior to 2015. Corbyn's ascent to party leadership was facilitated by a change in the voting rules of the party designed to diminish the power of unions and boost Blairism (Maignashca & Dean, 2019). Even though the outcome proved ironic, the change to one-member-one-vote system, brought in on the claim of increased democracy and celebrated by Blair himself, was criticized by the left for privileging the voices of the unorganized membership over the organized trade unions (Butler, 2020; Nunns, 2016). Still, with Corbyn's ascent to the leadership, the left was seen to be taking advantage of an opportune moment to seize control of the party. The movement that emerged out of this turn of events, however, may or may not have been prepared for the task of ending the dominance of Blairite politics in the party.

Corbyn himself belonged to the so-called 'hard left' faction in the Labour party led by Tony Benn in the 1980s, distinguished from the 'soft left', out of which Blairism emerged. The influence of Bennite politics on Corbyn informed his anti-imperialism, his left Keynesianism, and his relationship of mutual antagonism with the neoliberals in the Blairite camp, given Bennite politics became marginalized in the party with the ascent of Blair. But the politics of the movement that coalesced behind Corbyn was not reducible to Corbyn's own politics and was far from uniformly hard left. The membership of the

party, which soared to record levels under Corbyn, along with its affiliate activist organizations such as *Momentum*, remained a dominant influence on the politics of the movement alongside Corbyn's own politics. Culturally, Corbyn's base was predominated by the distinctly generational voice of the urban, university-educated, socially progressive class, struggling within a precarious job market and an out-of-reach housing market—the so-called “precarious urban graduate” which according to Gilbert (2021) made up Corbynism's core constituency. This social group was also the key constituency of what Dean describes as a movement of “popular leftism” underpinning Corbynism. The phenomenon of popular leftism, as “a (potentially) counter-hegemonic cultural and political formation [...] that aims to challenge neoliberalism”, was, as Dean describes, present in the Labour party prior to Corbyn, manifesting for instance as subcultures of leftist fandom surrounding Miliband, but was far from a dominant force. While these cultural tendencies flourished under Corbyn, they occasionally also clashed with Corbyn's own politics, with the movement overall containing both hard and soft left elements.

Some, like Gilbert (2021), have gone so far as to suggest that a key dynamic leading to Corbyn's defeat was his “recalcitrant” Bennite politics which placed him at odds with his core constituency of precarious urban graduates, especially over issues such as electoral reform, which both Benn and Corbyn were against, and any tactical alliances with third parties, including with the left-leaning Greens under Caroline Lucas. In Gilbert's reading, the electoral defeat of 2019 is attributed more to the loss of the centrist vote than the Leave vote. But this is a contested interpretation as the loss of the pro-Remain vote, although significant, did not translate to seat loss in the scales that the loss of the Leave vote did. Furthermore, Miguashca & Dean's analysis (2019) of the complex political dynamics of Corbynism explicitly rules out assessments of the movement in terms of a throwback to the 1980s. What Gilbert's analysis highlights, however, is the tensions between Corbyn's own political orientation – especially being a Eurosceptic, like Benn, and as well, his focus on anti-imperialism and Palestine solidarity—with that of the broader movement that backed him.

In terms of policy content, the movement on the whole stood opposed to the neoliberal politics of Blair, but in terms of social policies there was a lot of commonalities. Dean's articulation of popular leftism further contends that this mode of politics, being engaged as it is in the terrain of popular culture, is bound to be subject to and

reproducing the cultural logic of neoliberalism. This is especially apparent in the celebrity culture of this emergent left (Dean, 2023b), characterized by the exclusion of marginalized voices, and the entrepreneurialism of the neoliberal culture. Especially, the role of centre-left outlets such as *Guardian* and *New Statesman* as a place where a diverse range of left voices struggled for visibility, and the influence of their editorial politics—which is on the whole closer to the pre-Corbyn politics in the Labour party, if not outright Blairite—in determining which voices were platformed and amplified and which were excluded, mitigated only to some extent by the rise of the independent radical left media, should be examined further for the role they played in shaping the left discourse during this period. The Blairite faction itself should also be recognized for its outsized influence on the Parliamentary Labour Party and consequently its structural influences on the politics of Corbynism. The overall anti-populist orientation of this faction (Dean, 2023b) made them deeply hostile toward Corbyn personally and the activist dynamics surrounding him, such as *Momentum*, which was often viewed as a factional pressure group rather than a genuine movement (Jewell, 2023). Yet, as evident in the chronology of events leading to the adoption of the second referendum policy and later in Starmer's replacing Corbyn with the support of the left faction, the borders between Corbynism and the Blairite faction proved far more porous.

Corbynism was also propped up by a cohort of 'old school' leftists, trade union leaders—such as the trade unionist Andrew Murray and *Unite*'s president, Len McCluskey—and Labour MPs from the 'heartlands' of the party—such as the party chair Ian Lavery, and MP John Trickett—who functioned as advisors and allies to Corbyn, though their politics (falling closer to the 'Lexit' position in the Brexit debate), often clashed with that of the typical Corbynite activist. As the salience of 'Lexit' or soft Brexit started to wane and the party started to move in the direction of the second referendum, the influence of this camp waned also. Also notably, during Corbyn's tenure, his support among organized labour did not see a meaningful increase and neither did the UK see an increase in the unionization of workers, despite Labour's pro-union stance and the promise of repealing anti-union laws, if elected (Jäger, 2019).

Overall, this mapping points to a heterogeneous and convoluted composition of forces and their subsequent struggle over shaping Corbynism's politics and direction. The dynamics that this struggle gave rise to, played an important role in the adoption of the 2019 Brexit policy: Unacknowledged in the narrative of right-wing sabotage

discussed earlier is the fact that it was the overwhelming support among the party membership and its activist base for stopping Brexit that conjoined with circumstantial factors and tilted the scale in favour of adopting the second referendum, despite the obvious electoral disadvantages of the policy. By mid-2019, Corbyn's key allies such as Diane Abbott, some of the younger Corbynista MPs such as Russell-Moyle and Osamor, and crucially the Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, had also come around.

In the end, it was the persistent and growing divergence under Corbyn among the diverse factions—Corbyn's activist and membership base, organized labour, the party's base of support outside the metropolitan cores, and the anti-Corbyn faction of the PLP—whose interests could not all be combined, that sealed the fate of the movement. The disagreement over the Brexit policy within the Corbyn cabinet came to reflect not a left-right division, but predictably, Brexit's geographical divide, with the adoption of the second referendum an indication of where the balance of power under Corbyn lied:

Divisions over Brexit cut across the left/right cleavage in the PLP: Labour front-benchers such as the party chair Ian Lavery were strongly opposed to a second referendum, and McCluskey argued against a sudden shift towards the hard-Remain camp, but a group of MPs that included staunch opponents of Corbyn like Stephen Kinnock and Ruth Smeeth also composed an open letter (BBC News, 2019), denouncing the 'toxic' idea of a second referendum as a gift to the nationalist right (Finn, 2019, p.31).

Some interpreted this outcome as a blind spot arising from the membership of the party being sparse in the North and the Midlands (Gough, 2020), while to Labour's pro-Corbyn Northern MPs, Lavery and Trickett, it represented a gamble not unlike the one that failed to help Theresa May in 2017, and distinctly Blairite in character: to take for granted the continued support of the North and the Midlands while trying to reach for more anti-Brexit, liberal democratic, urban voters. They saw it as a continuation of the party's Southward turn initiated by and associated with Blairism (Radice, 1992): away from the formerly working-class communities in the party's heartlands and toward the social liberalism of the middle classes—something Corbynism had vowed to reverse. Even though for a period in 2015 and 2016 Labour under Corbyn attempted to organize in the deindustrialized areas with the promise of economic renewal, the attempt was later abandoned due to pressures of Brexit (Lavery and Trickett, 2019; Lavery & Trickett, 2020). A similar perspective leads Chris Bickerton, professor of politics and international

studies at Cambridge and a leading voice of 'Lexit', to conclude in his post-mortem of Corbynism in *Guardian* that:

Ideologically, Corbynism was a break from New Labour centrism but sociologically, it was more Blairite than Tony Blair. As the Labour MP Jon Cruddas has argued (2019, as cited in Bickerton), the Corbyn revolution in the Labour party has narrowed its social base even further, making it the party of young, middle-class southerners, popular in London and some prosperous university towns.

For others still, including many in the party's membership and activist base, moving toward a more Remain-friendly Brexit position was the only principled option against the culture of anti-immigration, racism, and xenophobia that Brexit fueled (Mason, 2019) and the electorally responsible one given the polling that showed Labour losing votes to the centre. Butler (2020) summarizes the disagreement between McDonnell and McCluskey, based on Owen Jones' account of events in *This Land* (2021) in the lead-up to the adoption of the second referendum:

'The army is crumbling,' McDonnell said when the Unite leader, Len McCluskey, pressed him on his growing receptiveness to a second referendum on Brexit. McCluskey was skeptical: he'd heard rumbles of discontent in the party's northern heartlands. His allies in the leader's office believed that McDonnell's head had been turned by lobbying from the deeply anti-Corbyn People's Vote campaign; it is more likely that he changed his mind in light of polling showing Labour hemorrhaging votes to Remain parties, and because of widespread disenchantment among party activists. In his view, no party could win an election without its foot soldiers; in McCluskey's, the move would alienate voters in the Red Wall constituencies which had been slipping away from the party for decades. Both of them were right. (Butler, 2020)

To some, McDonnell's electoral concern was no more than an "irrational fear of Change UK" (Eagleton, 2022)—the splinter party of anti-Corbyn ex-Labour MPs. McDonnell knew, as the results started to come in on election night, that he had miscalculated, and his Brexit policy was to blame. But for those who saw the Brexit policy justified and had supported the change, including Jones (2021) and Gilbert (2021), there ultimately was "no path to victory for Labour" even if McDonnell had not stepped in.

4.3. A Path to Victory?

Gilbert, who believed Labour had no path to victory in 2019, later revised the 2017 surge accordingly to argue that in retrospect, it was not a victory for the left since it

involved “persuading a section of the racists” to vote with the left (Jeremy Gilbert, 2020). The potential long-term path to victory he conceives of would have involved Corbyn entering an alliance with the third parties as early as before the 2017 election to advocate for electoral reform—two things that Corbyn was personally averse to (2021). A correction to the First-Past-the-Post system in this perspective, with its guarantee of proportionate representation for Labour party’s outsized urban support, is seen as the only path available to a left that is averse to coalition building with Brexiteers.

From the opposite perspective and in defense of Corbyn, Eagleton who published an extended biography of Starmer in 2022, places more blame on Starmer himself, who played the role of the shrewd saboteur, party to the centrist wrecking operation while keeping close to Corbyn. By being not outright hostile to Corbyn, unlike the majority of Corbyn’s first shadow cabinet in the 2015-2017 years, Eagleton argues, Starmer managed to secure a position as the Brexit shadow secretary and influence Brexit policy post-2017. From that position he blocked a populist Brexit policy after 2017, sabotaged negotiations with May’s government for a Norway Plus model and worked closely with the People’s Vote to court a chunk of Corbyn supporters toward backing Remain (Seymour, 2022).

From a more self-reflexive position, Jones, who is not as committed to a pro-Remain stance as Gilbert, though eventually backed a second referendum, argues in his immediate post-mortem of the election, that Labour’s “decisive failure – yes, with hindsight – was that the Labour leadership did not use the political capital of the 2017 election to make a principled case for a Norway-style soft Brexit” (Jones, 2019b). Corbyn’s protracted indecision, he argues later in his book-length assessment, enabled the growing chasm among the membership over Brexit and generated a political vacuum within which the radical Remain movement could grow and influence key figures:

His protracted indecision generated a political vacuum that enabled the arch-centrist Remain movement to grow throughout 2018, winning over previously skeptical figures like Starmer and McDonnell. By May 2019, both had embraced the need for a second referendum, and duly scuppered negotiations between the government and opposition—forfeiting the final opportunity to secure a ‘soft’ Leave option. (Eagleton, 2021, p. 139)

This is a weakness of the Corbyn movement acknowledged by leftist commentators across the board. Finn (2021) similarly argues:

The Labour membership was predominantly anti-Brexit in its sympathies — far more so than the party’s wider electorate. Members might accept on pragmatic grounds the idea that Labour could not oppose withdrawal from the EU, but they would not do so with any great enthusiasm. Corbyn’s leadership largely neglected to organize in support of its desired policy within the party, which proved to be a serious error. It meant that there was an empty discursive space in which arguments that Labour must oppose all forms of Brexit could take hold.” (p. 141)

James Meadway (2021), McDonnell’s former economic advisor and the director of Progressive Economy Forum think tank, highlights contingent factors, such as the hubris arising from the positive shock of 2017, resulting in the assumption that they just needed to “repeat the same trick”, as contributing to the absence of meaning organizing around desired policies post-2017. In Jones’s reading, the indecision is attributed to Corbyn’s conflict-averse personality and seen as an essential character flaw. For Jones McDonnell emerges as the left’s lost leader, someone with more political insight, discipline, and finesse and less politically adventurist than Corbyn, who could have steered the ship more confidently, even though McDonnell himself had acknowledged later his mistake regarding the second referendum (Eagleton, 2022; Butler, 2020).

In Jones’s account as well as Meadway’s, Starmer’s role in the Labour’s 2019 Brexit policy goes unacknowledged—a fact reflected also in both supporting Starmer’s leadership bid post-Corbyn and advocating for the left to stay in the party and fight to push Starmer to the left (Meadway, 2023). Their argument hinges on their belief about Corbyn’s economics being established as a new baseline in the party and in Starmer’s leadership pledge to advocate for them—a pledge which he later broke as he engaged in a well-documented purge of the party’s left faction, as pointed out by Eagleton (2023) in his response to Meadway. Still, through Seymour’s review of Eagleton’s book a key question arises: Why did Corbyn give Starmer a prominent role in the shadow cabinet and why he and his team repeatedly bent to Starmer’s intransigence? (Seymour, 2022)

Eagleton’s answer is to place the blame on the ‘conformist left’ who weakened Corbyn’s position, especially on McDonnell who convinced Corbyn in the end to give in to the second referendum compromise. In McClusky’s memoir of the era, which offers a similar read on Starmer’s role, Corbyn is criticized more outrightly. Like Jones, McClusky believes that Corbyn’s weak leadership style was to blame, as it bred insurgencies in his shadow cabinet and undermined his own position (Seymour, 2022). Seymour’s own assessment, however, is more cognizant of the structural factors informing Corbyn’s

dilemma—factors that have to do with the heterogeneous composition of the movement, the tensions among the party’s divergent factions and the threat of the split that Brexit posed to the party. This threat and Corbyn’s strong preference toward maintaining party unity, Seymour argues, informed his tolerance of Starmer—an insight further highlights the untenable and fragile nature of the coalition behind Corbyn. This fragility further highlights the structural barriers to raising the flag of populism within the coordinates of a conventional mainstream political party—the very factor which has been argued as differentiating Corbynism from other European left populist movements.

This is not to argue that the goals of Corbyn’s movement were necessarily impossible to achieve within the confines of the Labour party. But the movement as it was, with the composition and the tendencies that it had, did not possess the capacity and the infrastructure required to achieve those goals. Meadway’s insight about the hubris in the aftermath of 2017 and its ramifications is a factor speaking to this aspect of the movement. Separate lessons drawn from the defeat in books by Andrew Murray and by James Schneider, Corbyn’s Communication advisor and the co-founder of *Momentum*, also encourage such a reading. Both Murray and Schneider discuss the “social weightlessness and political pre-maturity” (Seaton, 2022) of the movement behind Corbyn, which informed its vulnerability to the “wedge” issue of Brexit. Going forward, Schneider discusses the formation of a left bloc as a coalition of social movements. Joe Guinan (2020), reflecting on the lessons of Corbynism from a similar perspective, writes in *Red Pepper* about the necessity of base building and community organizing and their absence Corbynism’s biggest shortcoming:

Following the remarkable near-success of 2017, political education and movement-building work became the imperative. The failure to advance in these areas in the intervening period – two wasted years in which much of the left was seduced by ‘Remain’ fantasies – sowed the seeds of our December 2019 defeat. [...] Here is the crux of the matter: we have developed a programme way in advance of the social forces and political groundwork required to carry it to victory. We simply weren’t ready on the ground, where it mattered. (Guinan, 2020)

Corbyn’s movement had set itself up with a daunting task of challenging the neoliberal common sense, but what these lessons highlight is that it lacked the political maturity, infrastructure, and rootedness in communities to carry it out successfully. The need for more community organizing is especially paramount in light of Marxist geographer Jamie Gough’s analysis of the challenge Brexit posed for the left (2020) and

the fact that with “either a Remain or a soft Brexit strategy”, Labour had an enormous task of “explaining the logic of its policy” (p. 17). The electorate’s understanding of economic realities of Britain and the EU, which has been eroded over the decades by the market fundamentalism of neoliberal ideology and the Thatcherite dogma of “there is no alternative”, Gough argues, formed a crucial backdrop to Labour’s Brexit troubles.

In the next section, I will engage the lens of left populism and the way ‘thin’ conceptions of populism, critiqued at the outset, can encourage the “social weightlessness” identified as a major shortcoming of Corbynism through these readings.

4.4. Populism vs Majoritarianism

The most important reason for Corbynism’s near-success in 2017 and its subsequent defeat in 2019 was that the inherent fragility of the coalition behind Corbyn which was successfully managed in 2017, broke down in 2019, most importantly due to the shifts in the political landscape vis-à-vis Brexit. But there were also changes in the party’s campaigning style and strategy between 2017 and 2019, which can be analyzed using what Maignashca & Dean (2019) refer to as the “descriptor” model of populism. I will demonstrate in this section that such an analysis in the case of Corbynism can help highlight the ways in which the 2019 campaign was a *less* populist campaign than 2017, but ultimately allows only for superficial speculations as to the reasons behind it or ways it could have been mitigated.

A thorough examination of the ‘degree’ to which Corbynism adhered to a populist description comes through Woodford’s work (2023), where she articulates six distinct criteria of left populism based on Laclau and Mouffe’s theory, against which she examines Corbynism’s performance. From this perspective, the movement succeeded in some respects, for instance, at a discursive linking of separate demands such as between affordable housing and healthcare and situating them within the broader movement against austerity. On the other hand, one of the key manifestations of Corbynism’s anti-populist streak, according to Woodford, was its tendency toward ‘introversion’, in the sense of placing a disproportionate focus on the party, rather than on the discursively constructed ‘people’, which is the focal point of populist politics. This, she writes, made Corbyn appear as a representative of the party members against the PLP, more often than as a representative of the electorate before Westminster. His

credibility as a populist leader suffered as the result of not being able to effectively present himself as sufficiently concerned and connected with the issues of the people.

The presupposition in this formulation is that had Corbyn managed to present as a representative of ‘the people’ against the ‘establishment’, as he did to a great extent in 2017, it would have been able to repeat the relative success of 2017. Even setting aside the question of to what extent a ‘successful’ implementation of populism, articulated as such, guarantees electoral success, the abstraction of describing anti-populist symptoms without an engagement with the deeper dynamics that informed it, disregards the fact that movements do not operate within a vacuum and are shaped by and through their reactions to external factors. Here, I will assess the dynamics that informed Corbynism’s ‘introversion’, taken as an example of its anti-populist tendency from the Laclauian perspective, to highlight the inefficacy of such a framing.

Woodford’s analysis does not contemplate the role of Brexit and the limited options that were available to Corbyn’s Labour with the changes in the political landscape post-2017, but Schneider’s defense of populism (2021) reflects on the ways in which Brexit contributed to the movement’s introversion. Through the Brexit process, he writes, Corbyn had to fight his battle within the confines of the parliament away from the public eyes to get May to incorporate at least parts of Labour’s policy into the withdrawal agreement:

The main voice of Labour’s left populism, Jeremy Corbyn, was greatly diminished by the Brexit process. He was trapped in Parliament, as just another participant in a deeply unappealing set of parliamentary tricks and games which failed to satisfy anyone and enraged those who wanted to see Brexit through. From late 2018 through most of 2019, if Corbyn appeared on television, it would often come in the form of a short clip from a parliamentary intervention as part of a Brexit process that few in the country related to. And when his interviews were broadcast, much of the content would be about Brexit, with Corbyn stuck presenting an ever evolving, unappealing compromise struck internally within the party with little collective thought given to what would actually appeal to voters. The burnish of 2017, when Corbyn had appeared a politician apart, authentically himself, was painfully wiped off.

Additionally, he argues that the second referendum policy hampered the campaign’s ability to engage in a populist communication strategy. Despite more ‘goods’ were on offer in the 2019 manifesto, the framing of the demands and the political

position of the movement were more institutional and bureaucratic, rather than agitational and oppositional. Meadway also argues that

...by abandoning the 'populist' antagonism of Brexit in favour of a broadly Remain position, Corbyn's Labour was led, over 2019, further and further down the path of an 'institutionalist' logic and, therefore, away from the 'populist' dynamic that gave it such an insurgent force in 2017. (p. 277)

This change was visible in the tone of the campaign, as Schneider describes. In the end, "they pursued both populist and non-populist strategies simultaneously – and therefore neither effectively." The 2019 campaign displayed an inevitable confusion over slogans, policies, direction, and focus: It changed slogans several times, ditching the iconic "For the Many, Not the Few", and went back and forth between an insurgent style of campaigning and Labour party's more traditional style and messaging (Schneider, 2021).

The tension between an institutional logic and a populist logic can be said to represent the clash between the anti-populism, according to Dean's articulation of this tendency (2022), of the People's Vote and the movement of *Remainism*, and the overtly populist orientation of Corbynism. More broadly, it underscored the conflict among the different factions that constituted Corbyn's movement and the Labour party. If in 2017, the compromise policy of soft-Brexit helped keep the Brexit-related conflicts within the party at bay, the supposed compromise policy of the second referendum in 2019 proved the impossibility of maintaining a consensus among the various factions—an impossibility which manifested in the disagreement between McDonnell and McClusky and led to an internal break down of Corbyn's coalition. The election result was therefore a demonstration of this internal breakdown of consensus (Meadway, 2021). The diversity that in 2017 was a point of strength, contributing to the movement's majoritarian appeal, by 2019 had become untenable. From this perspective, it was not so much that Corbynism's inadequate populism, including its undue introversion, failed to reap the guaranteed benefits of the populist strategy; it was rather the clashing of interests within the movement, co-existing with Corbyn's insistence on maintaining party unity, that contributed to both the inevitable introversion and poor electoral performance of 2019.

While an analysis of the conditions and the fate of the rest of Europe's populist wave is beyond the scope of this work, it should be noted that even though Corbynism has been framed, in accordance with the 'thin' conception of populism, as a 'borderline'

case, the structural barriers it faced especially vis-à-vis Brexit, were not unique to the UK case nor to Corbyn's movement. Both French and Spanish movements faced ambivalence and disorientation when confronted with the dynamics of nationalist populism. *Podemos* for instance was conflicted over the Catalan question (Jäger, 2018), *Insoumise* was overshadowed by le Pen's right populist movement, and *SYRIZA* failed to implement the outcome of a referendum which required it to stand up against the EU (Venizelos & Stavrakakis, 2022). Each situation was vastly different, shaped by the unique circumstances of each case. But when it came to building a populist front and executing the majority's will they were overdetermined by common factors and structural barriers.

This commonality illustrates the inadequacy of the descriptor model of populism for the analysis of the structural dynamics left movements faced in the political juncture of the 2010s. It also highlights the practical limitations of Laclau and Mouffe's theory, as argued by critics (Jäger, 2018; Hamburger, 2018): It is not immediately apparent, not based on Laclau and Mouffe's theory at least, how Corbyn's populist deficiency could have been overcome in 2019. On the surface, it appears that to have been *more* populist would have entailed Corbyn taking the opposite route and embracing a split. This was in fact suggested by some of the critics of the second referendum turn, such as Broder (2019) writing post-defeat in *Catalyst*:

Simply put, we did not act like a party that had won 40 percent (nearly 13 million votes) in a general election just two years before. Real leadership would have lain not in blindly following opinion polls or the Guardian, but rather in defending Labour's existing position and cutting off any route toward the second referendum. On both electoral and principled grounds, we should have faced down the "People's Vote" supporters and defended the integrity of the democratic decision of 2016, even if this had meant temporarily losing other soft-left or Blairite MPs, rather than conceding their argument halfway.

From across the divide, the pro-Remain camp's solution, as Gilbert (2021) argued, would have been to lean more heavily in the direction of Remain, even prior to the 2017 election, by entering into an alliance with the progressive third parties. These seemingly opposed solutions, would have shared one common outcome: In the post-2017 world, where the "the middle ground on Brexit had collapsed" (Jones, 2019a), and there was no consensus within the Corbyn camp around Brexit, either of these decisions would have resulted in casting off a significant portion of Corbyn's electoral base. And

this would have inevitably diminished the campaign's populist impact. This is to say, looking at it from either side of the Brexit divide, the populist path was blocked to Corbyn by December 2019, unless a new consensus could have been arrived at internally and campaigned for externally.

Against such criticisms, Schneider, in defence of Corbyn's populist credentials, argues (2021) that despite the challenges the second referendum posed for the movement's populist orientation, Corbyn's preference toward party unity, far from being informed by anti-populism, was rooted in his instinct toward a "relentless majoritarianism", which entailed bringing people together and reducing the chasm between Leavers and Remainers. Agreeing to the second referendum policy, from this lens, was a compromise necessary for maintaining not just party unity but also the movement's majoritarian appeal, even though it locked it into an anti-populist logic.

Schneider's emphasis on Corbyn's majoritarianism, and the way it clashed with the campaign's ability to mount a populist challenge, highlights the necessity of distinguishing, however subtle the distinction may be, between the Laclauian left populist articulation, and majoritarian politics more broadly. While the former entails a discursive construction of an abstract 'people' through a discursive linking of the unmet demands against an abstract establishment – a rhetorical entity that can be identified with the UK government or with the EU, or any other convenient enemies –, the latter is grounded in coalition building among diverse communities and divergent interests, informed by leftist anti-establishment politics. While in 2017 the populist discursive strategy combined with Corbyn's majoritarianism to give rise to a broad-based electoral coalition, the 2019 landscape proved hostile to such a convergence. Arguably, in 2019, after the collapse of the middle ground on Brexit, the only populist strategy available was a full-on embrace of the nationalist populism of Brexit, as successfully demonstrated by Corbyn's rival—a strategy that for Corbyn would have inevitably led to the alienation of large sections of the left and the centre.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

Left populism as articulated by Laclau and Mouffe has attracted a host of criticisms over the years (Hamburger, 2018) but it has remained a central theory for describing the resurgence of left politics throughout the 2010s. Corbynism's surge at the ballot box was heralded as a victory for left populism. Subsequently, its defeat, alongside that of the European movements, has been portrayed as the demise of left populism and either discussed through the shortcomings of the left populist strategy (Sunkara, 2019; Jager, 2019) or as the shortcomings of the movements in implementing the theory of left populism (Woodford, 2022). Despite key differences between Corbynism and other left populist movements, the demise of those movements can similarly be identified as either a shortcoming of the theory or the shortcomings of praxis. But such a formulation, which is an outcome of a 'thin' conception of left populism—a conception that concerns itself primarily with surface-level symptoms—produces a circular logic that ultimately adds little value to the understanding of the rise and fall of these movements. Still, the left movements that emerged in the 2010s represented a break from the pre-2010s left politics in terms of their engagement with mainstream politics and adoption of a majoritarian orientation.

In this essay, I have reviewed the conditions surrounding Corbynism's surge in 2017 and highlighted the role of the consensus among the centre and the left around a soft Brexit policy, combined with the campaign's populist communicative strategy, in delivering a positive outcome. Labour's 2017 performance demonstrated that when circumstances allowed for it, a significant portion of Labour's Brexit voting base could be convinced to back a soft Brexit over a hard one and support anti-austerity over a scapegoating of immigrants, evident in Labour attracting a broad base of voters and picking up votes on both sides of the Brexit divide, despite its expressed ideological opposition to stringent immigration control post-Brexit.

On the surface, this seems to offer a vindication of Mouffe's argument about the necessity of overcoming the cultural divide through economic appeals (2018) and to refute those critiques of the Laclauian theory that argue against such a possibility due to supporters of right-wing populism being fundamentally not persuadable to causes of justice and equality championed by the left (Hamburger, 2018). However, it cannot be

argued with any certainty that Corbyn's 2017 near-success is attributable to the construction of a populist front involving a discursive invocation of 'the people', as envisaged by Laclau and Mouffe, and not to the movement's broadly majoritarian appeal, which hinged upon coalition building among divergent groups and interests, inclusive of those Brexit voters who could be won over through economic appeals.

As Maignushca and Dean (2019) have argued vastly different left movements being commonly cast as instances of populism, rather than framed in accordance with their underlying oppositional content, is an outcome of the breakdown of the neoliberal hegemony and symptomatic of the universalization of a certain political ethos, rather than indicative of a strict adherence on the side of the movements to specific formulations of the term. It is debatable whether any of the movements that were deemed to constitute the left populist European wave did fully fit the description throughout their lifespan. In fact, different historical formations of left politics can be recognized, due to their oppositional impulse, as embodying varying degrees of populism, including, as Venizelo and Stavrakakis (2022) point out, the politics of Marx himself. The absence of populism, however, is only recognizable within the kind of mainstream liberalism that advocates for an adherence to the rules of capitalist democracy and stands largely in favour of the status quo. As such, a 'thin' conception of populism, which includes the Laclauian conception, though is best expressed through the Muddean conception and criticism of the notion, should be recognized as the product of a liberal perspective that finds radical and oppositional politics, regardless of their content, a threat to its hegemony and is fundamentally hostile to them. Such an identification is therefore unlikely to be beneficial to the goals of the movement itself.

The events of 2017-2019 proved the inadequacy of the theory of populism for the challenges faced by a left that seeks a mass appeal, echoing Jäger's note that Laclauian populism despite working in practice (albeit, occasionally only), "does not work in theory" (2018). Corbyn's 2019 defeat further exposed the difficulties of building and maintaining a broad-based coalition against the status quo and that such a coalition can only be achieved within the right circumstances and with a massive organizing effort, further highlighting the insufficiency of a discursive strategy alone in this regard. While some have advanced a narrative of right-wing sabotage regarding Corbyn's 2019 defeat, I have shown that this narrative, while highlighting important structural obstacles Corbynism faced, is ultimately an insufficient explanation of the 2019 outcome. Instead, I

have demonstrated lessons that highlight the movement's "social weightlessness" and insufficient organizing are more successful in getting to the root cause of the defeat. The pressure from the Labour Right only succeeded to break Corbyn's coalition after the shift in the Brexit landscape. This in turn only became possible due to the vacuum left by Corbyn's team and their failure to organize in favour of their preferred Brexit policy.

While thin conceptions of left populism would argue that Corbyn's 2019 defeat was due to the campaign's insufficient populism, I have demonstrated this insight to be of little value in guiding left strategy with regards to the complex dilemma posed by Brexit. Attempts to mitigate the campaign's "populism deficiency", as I have shown, would have resulted in cutting down on its majoritarian appeal, and consequently, on its ability to mount an effective populist challenge. Instead, I have distinguished, using Schneider's formulation (2021), between such thin formulations of populism and Corbyn's politics of "relentless majoritarianism". While the latter emphasizes a coalition building exercise among divergent factions and interests against the ruling class, the latter highlights the discursive construction of 'a people' through linking of unmet demands. In practice in Corbynism's rhetoric, 'the people' or 'the many' ended up, especially in 2019, being an empty signifier, as it could neither distinguish itself sufficiently from the nationalist populism of the right, nor benefit from it, and was therefore forever stuck in an unfavourable place of needing to both oppose and mirror the populism of the right, to secure an electoral victory.

Left commentators on both sides of the Brexit divide have concluded from this dilemma that not only was there no path to victory for Corbynism but also that there is no path to a left populism (Meadway, 2020; Butler, 2020; Jäger, 2019). For some sections of the left, post-Corbyn, this has come to mean an embrace of anti-populism (Hoare, 2021, Smith, 2021). Such a position is arrived at through an uncritical adoption of left populism as a frame of reference for Corbynism's politics, and as a result of reading Corbyn's defeat as an indication that the content and the form of left populism, i.e. leftism and populism, are fundamentally at odds. The logical endpoint of this argument concludes anti-populism and minoritarian politics as the only paths available to the left. This, however, disregards the role played by the anti-populist dynamics of the second referendum in Corbyn's defeat, and the fact that, as I have shown, the politics of Corbyn's movement were not reducible to populism in the Laclauian sense. It also disregards the fact that electoral success was not intrinsically unavailable to Labour in

2019, but in the absence of a sustained effort to cultivate the conditions for it, it eventually became so. A more nuanced framework arising from a distinction between discourse-based left populism and majoritarianism more broadly would recognize that neither populism in its thin conception, nor anti-populism are *ipso facto* more compatible with leftism. Crucially, thin formulations of populisms are not conducive to a conception of left politics that can sufficiently distinguish itself from the populism of the right, as the experience of the 2010 movements has illustrated. But this does not justify leaning into anti-populism or writing off majoritarian politics as an avenue for left politics.

Through my analysis of Corbynism, populism emerges at best as a communicative campaign strategy, in line with Venizelos and Stavrakakis (2022) conception of Corbyn's populist orientation, and as a secondary characteristic of the movement. Corbyn's majoritarianism however, constitutes a more distinct characteristic, especially as reflected in the heterogenous coalition formed behind him, which encompassed both populist and anti-populist tendencies, and contributing to its ability to attract a broad-based coalition of voters in 2017. Another unique characteristic of the movement was the politics of Corbyn's key constituency, conceptualized by Dean as "popular leftism", described as a deployment of left politics within the terrain of popular culture. The interlinking of a majoritarian politics that lacked sufficient base building, and a popular leftism, with its tendency toward reproducing the cultural logic of neoliberalism, should be explored further for the ways it informed the strengths as well as the limitations of Corbyn's movement and contributed to its overall ability to mount an effective challenge to neoliberalism. Exploring these unresolved tensions and the way they may be showing up within the politics of the contemporary left post-Corbyn and in the aftermath of the left populist wave remains a critical task for the left.

The critical question facing the contemporary left after the demise of these movements is how an alternative to neoliberalism can be articulated, as Schneider (2021) argues, "with and for" the majority, in such a way that different classes and identities can see themselves reflected in it. My analysis of the 2017 and 2019 Corbyn campaigns demonstrates that the path to articulating such an alternative is not through an embrace of the anti-populism of the centre or a reversion to minoritarian or the "folk politics" of pre-2010. The path is rather through a construction of a broad-based coalition that can mount an effective challenge to the neoliberal common sense, which involves shedding the abstractions of left populism with its inevitable fallback into a nationalist

conception of 'the people' and conceiving of majoritarianism instead through a 'thick' conception of the majority. Such a conception cannot be constructed at the level of discourse first then carried out top-down. It would need to arise out of the organic struggles of those movements that are grounded in the realities of the communities that the left hopes to represent, organizing in the workplaces and among the communities hardest hit by neoliberal capitalism.

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