

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

Why Britain voted to leave the European Union

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Lecteur(s) :
Année académique 2019-2020
Master communication multilingue, finalité Langues des affaires

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Introduction

On 23 June 2016, the British electorate, by a majority vote, decided to leave the European Union. The vote was very close, with just 51.9% of voters opting for what became known as “Brexit”—the exit of Britain from the European Union (EU). Since that time, it has been unclear in what form this exit will take place. There are decisions to be made, for example, concerning whether the exit will be accompanied by a trade deal with the EU, or will instead be a “no deal” Brexit (Brakman, Garretson & Novy, 2017).

The goal of this paper is to understand precisely why the Brexit referendum passed. Various explanations have been proposed. One is that the referendum, or its result, was a product of a generational change within the British electorate (Carl, Dennison & Evans, 2019). The idea might be that younger Britons, who feel themselves to be part of Europe in ways that previous generations have not, failed to vote in sufficient numbers. Another possible explanation looks to the kinds of arguments and other considerations that were advanced by the “Leave” campaign running up to the referendum (Becker, Fetzer & Novy, 2017a). Much or most of the discussion was on British sovereignty, economic matters, and the issue of immigration. The issue of sovereignty has long been discussed, since before Britain joined the EU in 1973. The issue of immigration has become much more widely and hotly debated in recent years, partly because of regional instabilities (perhaps most prominently in Syria) that have led to a flood of migrants with no obvious place to go (Becker, Fetzer & Novy, 2017b).

Prior to the referendum, the “Remain” position focused largely on economic issues (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley, 2017). It is at least arguable that the importance of remaining in the EU for economic stability was not widely enough recognised prior to the decision to leave. Certainly, few people could have predicted how complex and difficult it would prove to be to strike a deal with the EU for Britain’s exit. Moreover, the EU is now keen to minimize the likelihood of further defections, which may help to explain its relative intransigence when it

has come to negotiating an exit deal for the United Kingdom (Jessop, 2017). Other causes, or causal influences, of the Brexit decision that have been proposed include the following: voter age; level of education; political conservativeness; effects of neoliberal economic policies; and differing conceptions of British national identity (Gross, 2019).

This paper argues against the idea that Brexit was a consequence of a generational gap among voters. It should be noted, however, that caution is in order when discussing the causes or the reasons behind an event as complex and multifaceted as the Brexit decision. On one hand, there is little doubt that all of the factors listed in the previous paragraph did make some difference to the eventual decision to leave the EU. The question must always be which factor (or factors) were most important in producing Brexit (Guardia, 2016). On the other hand, recognising that all or most of the proposed factors were to some extent operative is fully consistent with singling out one factor as being of most importance (Jessop, 2017). Next to the generational hypothesis, another possibility is that Brexit was mostly a product of decades of neoliberal economic policies that have made a few people incredibly wealthy, while leaving the average person worse off than he or she was decades ago (and despite relatively consistent economic growth). From this perspective, Brexit takes its place along with the rise of far-right political movements and leaders in Europe (and in the United States, for that matter) as effects of economic disenfranchisement (O'Rourke, 2018). Most of those who voted for Brexit were willing to try almost anything if the alternative was simply the maintenance of the status quo. The two remaining possible causal factors are, first, more general economic considerations and, second, the issue of immigration (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley, 2017).

Abbreviations

- European Union = EU
- Exit of Britain from the European Union = Brexit
- Federal Bureau of Investigation = FBI
- Finance, insurance and real estate = FIRE sector
- Information and computing technologies = ICT
- International Monetary Fund = IMF
- Member of Parliament = MP
- National Health Service = NHS
- North American Free Trade Agreement = NAFTA
- United Kingdom = UK
- United Kingdom Independence Party = UKIP
- United States = US

What was at issue

The Leave position on Brexit, running up to the referendum, pressed heavily on the claim that 350 million pounds are sent every week to the EU by Britain (Clegg 2017, p. 39). The implication was that this sum could be saved, every week, and applied to causes that the British people care deeply about that may be underfunded, most obviously the National Health Service (NHS). Thus far, this has certainly not turned out to be the case. One of the principle architects of the Leave campaign, later admitted that Leave would not have won the referendum had it not been for this claim (Clegg 2017, p. 40) Another focus of the Leave campaign, the one that is perhaps most often given credit for the Brexit vote, was immigration. Britain, in common with many European countries and others, has become understandably anxious about the veritable flood of migrants and immigrants that have been produced by war, as in Syria, and by neoliberal economic policies, as in the case of Greece. There is no doubt that immigration was a key factor in the Brexit referendum, whether or not we ultimately assign it the role of principal cause of Brexit (Matt & Zhou, 2018).

Before beginning to look at some of these claims in more detail, it is worth taking a moment to locate Brexit in a scheme of international events that many writers have argued are closely connected (Wincott, 2018). Two other key events in the world that occurred more or less at the same time as Brexit were the ascension of an openly racist president of the US, on one hand, the rise of far-right political parties in many parts of Europe, on the other. As noted, many writers have suggested that these three events must be intimately connected (Wincott, 2018; Perrigo, 2019). The argument of the present paper will largely reject this view. It is true that so-called neoliberal economic policies have had a large hand in producing all three events. Were it not for substantial economic discontent in Britain, which does certainly seem to be largely due to neoliberalism, it is doubtful whether the Leave position would have won in the referendum. It is certainly the case that US president Trump would never have been elected

were it not for the widely perceived economic disenfranchisement felt by most Americans. And finally, the rise of the Far Right in Europe is surely closely connected to rapidly increasing wealthy inequality (Walter, 2018).

However, immigration is also a crucially important factor in all three cases—arguably the most important factor, as we will see in the case of Brexit—and the immigration issue is simply not the same in the US as it is in Britain and Europe. British and European concerns about immigration and migration are well-founded, whether or not the people in question correctly perceive the dangers associated with a mass influx of foreigners to their shores (Innes, 2018). In the US, by contrast, the immigration issue is mostly illusory. There has not been nearly the influx of immigrants into the US that other countries in the world have experienced (de Zavala, Guerra & Simao, 2017). In short, conservatives in the US have simply found that immigrants from the Global South make convenient scapegoats for the real problems, principally economic problems, that have in actuality nothing to do with immigration. For this reason, and for others that will emerge later, it is a mistake to view recent events in the US as too closely related to what is happening in the UK and Europe (Innes, 2018).

There are four main reasons that commentators have focused on when attempting to understand why Britons voted to leave the EU. The first is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is roughly the view that economic markets should be, first, completely open to competition, and, second, free from government interference. In practice the first requirement means that protectionist measures—such as tariffs, quotas, price minimums and government subsidies should be eschewed. The second requirement is broader in scope, intended to eliminate or drastically reduce virtually all action on the part of governments meant in some way to play a role in the economy. It is meant to eliminate or reduce, for example, welfare programs that transfer public funds to the least well off in society; protections on labour, such as safety requirements and worker safety protection practices; and even, in many cases, proactive

Keynesian measures such as government-directed full employment programmes (Harvey, 2005). The general idea behind the view that neoliberalism was the main factor in causing Brexit is that the economic ideology, and its many effects, have been the key driver of massive inequalities in wealth and income, both across nations and states, and within individual states such as the UK. Massive inequalities cause social and political unrest, and they tend to lead to people blaming whatever party is ready to hand. In the case of Brexit, inequality has tended to lead to the blaming of two parties: the European Union, which as noted earlier was depicted more than a quarter-billion pounds from the UK each week; and immigrants, who are seen not so much as threatening British jobs (though some parties have expressed concern about this), but as being massive drain on the resources of key public services such as the NHS.

If one were to judge simply by the number of published accounts supporting a given position on the reasons why the British people opted for Brexit, neoliberalism would almost certainly win the contest. There are several interrelated but distinct cases for this conclusion in the vast literature. One source of support is the allegation that “support for the Leave option in the Brexit referendum was systematically higher in regions hit harder by economic globalization” (Colantone & Stanig, 2018). This does certainly provide prima facie evidence for the hypothesis in question, given that “economic globalization” is commonly used as a synonym for “neoliberalism”. However, caution must be employed in evaluating claims such as this one. As we all know, correlation is not causation. While there does have to be an explanation for the divergence in question (assuming that it is statistically significant), the explanation might not be that people in regions hardest hit by neoliberalism were, for that reason, more likely to vote Leave on the Brexit referendum. Another possibility is that there were other factors at work. For example, Scotland voted resoundingly to Remain, with 62% of the vote. And whether or not Scotland has been harder hit by the effects of neoliberal economic

policies, it has additional differences with other parts of the UK that might be the real explanation for the victory of the Remain side among the Scottish people.

As noted earlier, neoliberalism is frequently credited, not merely with causing the victory of the Leave side of the Brexit vote, but with the rise of far-right political parties, both in Europe and the US. It is certain that Trump would not have been elected president in the US were it not for a very large sense of economic disenfranchisement on the part of the majority of the American people. And a similar, though perhaps more complex, story is to be told concerning those nations in Europe that have experienced a surge of nationalist political parties and candidates. As one discussion puts the point,

The ongoing and increasingly intense conservative backlash currently taking place across Europe is often understood as a populist reaction to neoliberal policy. The neoliberal assault on the welfare state [...] has eroded post-war social security even as it destroyed people's faith in electoral politics. Couple with a sharp increase in inequality and rapid globalisation, the technocratic nature of neoliberal government has angered electorates across the continent. Wanting to "take back control" of their political life, these electorates have turned away from traditional centrist parties and have thrown their lot in with populist parties on the fringes of the political spectrum.

(Cornelissen, 2019)

One might, of course, ask what far-right political parties and candidates have to do with the consequences of neoliberalism. This is a fair question, but one that has a relatively easy and obvious answer. What these parties and candidates represent is, first, a departure from the way that things have been in the past. People tend to be understandably inclined to think that rising out of economic disenfranchisement is going to require a radical solution. Second, and relatedly, the far-right political parties offer a ready-made scapegoat for the economic and social ills of the relevant countries: immigration. In Britain, for example, immigration has been widely

blamed for the diminution in services, and quality of services, provided by the NHS. And in the US, immigration is blamed for everything from high crime rates to lacklustre economic growth. As we will see, the reality is more complex than these reflections acknowledge. However, it is well to be very clear on one point from the beginning: neoliberal economic policies cannot ultimately be divorced from concerns about immigration in explaining the relevant phenomena. For concerns about immigration are arguably fuelled, in large part, by a sense of economic disenfranchisement.

Despite the fact that concerns about economic conditions and concerns about immigration are ultimately closely intertwined, some authors have argued that the latter played a larger role in the Brexit decision than the former. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley (2017), one of the most exhaustive treatments of the reason for the victory of the Leave campaign, has offered qualified support for this position. One chief piece of evidence that these authors draw upon is the natures of the respective campaigns—what amounted to “propaganda campaigns”—that were waged in the months leading up to the referendum. While each side appealed to a number of considerations, the Remain campaign relentlessly utilized economic considerations in support of its view on the proper way to vote. (In fact, each campaign was made up not of one, but of several groups of organizations and supporters. This is a complexity that will be dealt with only later in the paper.)

The campaign to keep Britain in the EU would focus heavily and relentlessly on a core narrative of economic risk, claiming over and over again that leaving the EU would threaten the national economy and people’s finances. The message would dominate almost every aspect of the Remain campaign and be assiduously cultivated by an entire case of prominent politicians, business leaders and spokespersons for international organizations. These Remainers were guided by the assumption that voters would reach their decisions after assessing the costs and benefits of EU membership and that, in the

end, they would listen to their head over their heart. (Clark, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, pp. 33-34).

The authors are not exaggerating the reality of the diversity of people and organisations that were brought forth to assert the devastating economic consequences of leaving the EU. Parties from the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney; to a large technology company based in Cambridge; to the chief executive of British gas; to officials at the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—all proclaimed the view that the economy as a whole, and even individuals' private finances, would likely be ruined or at least seriously negatively affected by the success of the Leave campaign.

The Leave campaign, for its part, put forward a more diverse set of considerations. It has already been noted that it prominently argued that hundreds of billions of pounds were essentially transferred from the UK to the EU each year; the implication being that the UK could make much better use of this money on its own, perhaps in shoring up the services of the NHS (Clark, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, pp. 50-52). But economic considerations were not nearly as prominent in the Leave campaign as in the Remain campaign. Vote Leave tried to associate serious crime with immigration. It suggested that the EU was spending more on furthering its own projects than on protecting Britain from terrorism. It also asserted corruption and wild inefficiency in the EU, again implying that British pounds sent to Brussels were largely wasted and could in any case do much more good by being spent at home (ibid). Nonetheless, the core Leave strategy was to emphasize the catastrophic consequences of the sort of increased and unchecked immigration that many Britons came to associate with continued membership in the EU. The focus was largely on the alleged deleterious consequences for the NHS of continued British membership in the EU. Fanciful stories of the NHS being “bled dry” by “health tourists” were unashamedly told and retold (ibid).

The remainder of the main attempted explanations for the Brexit vote are something of a motley crew. Some of them ascribe the decision to a sense that British uniqueness was somehow compromised, or lost, in the membership in the EU. In this group belong explanations that appeal to generational differences to explain the vote. Younger voters, for example, might be supposed to have weaker ties to the vision of a Europe that contain the UK. But there are other factors involved in most arguments in this vein, such as the question of British sovereignty and an alleged anti-intellectualism on the part of many residents of the UK (Tzouvala, 2018). As all informed accounts allow, and even emphasize, Britain has never been simply another member in the EU. There was pressure earlier in time to dissolve the partnership, but even setting this aside, Britain has remained exceptional among member states, for example in retaining its sovereign economic currency. There are also attempts to link British nationalism directly with Euroscepticism (Henderson et al., 2016).

Explanations for Brexit

The remainder of the paper will look in much more detail at all of these attempted explanations, as well as attempt to identify the single most operative factor, to the extent that there was one. The overall effort will require consideration of the founding purpose of the EU, how its operations may today diverge from that purpose, and the somewhat continuous British opposition to be considered just another European state.

In their book-length treatment of the reasons that Britain voted to leave the EU, Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017) provide an excellent account of the background against which the Brexit referendum took place. As is well known, the referendum took place on June 23 2016. On that day, by a fairly narrow margin, the British people chose the second answer to the following specific question: “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” (2017, p. 1). Of course, this was not the first time that Britain had collectively considered this question. An earlier referendum had been held in 1975. At that time the question was whether Britain should remain in the “European Community” (also known as the “Common Market”). The decision to remain seems to have been shaped by two leading factors. First, the overall economy of the UK was stagnating, along with the economies of much of the rest of the developed world. High inflation combined with high unemployment at this time, along with low levels of productivity (a condition that is frequently called “stagflation”). Second, Britain in 1975 still had a fairly stable political system, with the major parties enjoying high levels of public support. With the Brexit referendum four decades later, each of these factors—but especially the second—had decisively changed (2017, pp. 1-2). This is one general reason we can cite for the Brexit vote: the disintegration of Britain’s de facto two-party political system and the concomitant emergence of more radical elements in British politics, especially on the right.

The Prime Minister at the time of the Brexit vote was Conservative Party leader David Cameron. He had given in 2013 what became known as the “Bloomberg speech” (so named because it had been given at the Bloomberg office in London). In this speech Cameron promised a referendum on Britain’s place in the EU, “a move that many interpreted as an attempt to fend off growing pressure from a group of backbench Eurosceptic MPs [members of parliament] and the sudden rise of a new Eurosceptic party in national politics, UKIP [the United Kingdom Independence Party]. The latter was drawing much of its voting strength from disgruntled Conservatives who opposed EU membership” (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 2). Therefore, we can see the impact here of a factor mentioned just above. The emergence of the UKIP, along with related extremist conservative factions, had led to a fracturing of the traditional, two-party system in Britain; and this led, at least to some extent, to the pressures that produced both the Brexit referendum and the country’s decision concerning it.

UKIP had begun attempting to mobilise and utilise anti-immigrant sentiment among the British population in 2010. While it had been something of a fringe party previously, certainly in the time of the earlier 1975 referendum on Britain, in the years between 2010 and the Brexit vote the party became steadily more mainstream. As we will see, apprehension over immigration was one of the chief factors—perhaps even the single most important factor—that led to the result of the Brexit referendum.

No understanding of Brexit could be considered reasonably complete without understanding how the two camps on the issue (commonly labelled “Leave” and “Remain”) argued their sides to the British public in the months leading up to the referendum. The debate began properly in the late winter of 2015. A survey conducted at this time gives us a good approximation to the kinds of concerns that most weighed on the heads and hearts of the British electorate. Asked to identify the UK’s “most pressing issues”, 63% responded that immigration was the most important issue facing the country. A distant second was healthcare (39%) and

the third issue identified was the economy (33%). Of course, these issues are interrelated, especially the first two. A chief worry concerning immigration was that it was overloading the already heavily worked National Health Service (NHS) (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 11).

There were also reasons, however, to think that immigration was linked to concerns about the economy. As Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley explain,

Public anxiety over immigration [...] was being stimulated by other events. At the end of 2015, the argument that immigration was having negative effects on domestic workers, a view being pushed by UKIP and Nigel Farage, appeared to be legitimized in a widely circulated report by the Bank of England. The analysis suggested that rising immigration could drive down wages for low-skilled British workers, estimating that a 10-percentage point increase in the proportion of immigrants was associated with a nearly 2 per cent reduction in pay for semi- and unskilled workers in service industries such as care homes, shops and bars. (P. 12)

Some Britons also had concerns about the effect that the European refugee crisis would have on immigration into the UK. During the summer of 2015, for example, an estimated 100,000 people per month attempted to enter Europe by sea. Finally, national security and the safety of its citizens and residents were connected to issues of migration and immigration, for many British people, by the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015.

Now claims that immigration is associated with drains on social services, with harm to the economy and unemployment figures, and crime (including terrorism) must be handled carefully. They are frequently overblown or even specious. In the US, for example, the issue of immigration came to the fore of public consciousness only when Trump made it a central issue in his 2016 presidential campaign. Yet nearly every claim that he made concerning the US and immigration was incorrect or highly misleading. There is no crisis of immigration in the US

There is no evidence that even illegal immigration is a drain on the economy or leads to fewer jobs that Americans want to perform. And it was certainly false for the president to say, as he has on several occasions, that immigration increases levels of violent crimes. Moreover, there is no evidence that the numbers of immigrants entering the US is significantly higher now than it has been in recent years.

However, Britain is different from the US in some pertinent respects here. The UK, or at least England, is a very small country. There is a definite limit concerning how many immigrants it can comfortably receive, even if we set aside other concerns about immigration. Moreover, the UK does still have a fairly strong social welfare program, prominently including the NHS. The US does not have anything like a strong program in this respect, which is another reason to doubt that immigrants are taking advantage of American generosity.) There were and are serious concerns about the level of funding of the NHS even setting aside the issue of immigration. Finally, the UK's physical location makes it an attractive destination for many immigrants, migrants, and refugees; for example the millions of displaced Syrians caused by the country's civil war, or the many people fleeing Greece since its economy collapsed. If there is a specious concern that some in Britain have about immigration it would be the alleged connection between Islamic terrorism and immigration. There does not appear to be any strong evidence that people immigrating to Britain are more likely than any other population in the world to be associated with terrorist activities (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, pp. 12-3).

What, then, were the central arguments made by the "Leavers" and the "Remainers" in the months leading up to the Brexit referendum? The Remain campaign was supported by a majority of political parties, including Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the Green Party. A slogan that became popular at the time, associated with the Remain decision on the referendum, was that Britain was "Stronger In" the EU. For its part, the Leavers were, at least at first, a less popular and less politically unified group than were the Remainers. Among them were the

“Eurosceptics”, a group of people who had long viewed British membership in the EU as harmful to their country and its interests. The Leavers were also a less ideologically unified group. Many of them claimed an allegiance with Referendum Party of the 1990s (a group that sought an earlier referendum on Britain’s membership in the EU), and later with the UKIP.

Cameron and other leaders of his party recognized fairly early on that a surprisingly high number of Britons seemed to support the idea of Brexit. One strategy they employed was to try to win over some of these people by renegotiating the terms of Britain’s membership in the EU. When it did not prove to be possible to do this in any very serious way, in a short amount of time, the Conservatives were forced to adopt new strategies to combat the Leavers. They recognized that “the people wanted to see some serious reform. They were neither fiercely loyal to the EU nor flagrantly hostile. They were open to remaining in the EU but only if they were convinced that its powers had been reduced. Getting such reform was Cameron’s challenge” (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 20).

Unsurprisingly, the area that the British people viewed as most crucial for reform of either the EU, or simply of Britain’s place in it, was immigration. More specifically, there was a strong desire on the part of many British people to reduce the number of immigrants from other EU countries, on one hand, and to restrict the amount of welfare benefits existing immigrants were eligible for, on the other. These desires might seem reasonable in the abstract, but it is important to recognize that they are not obviously compatible with what the EU was designed to do, or with its explicit mission statement. The EU is expressly committed to ‘four freedoms’: “freedom of movement of goods, people, services, and capital over borders” (Foster, 2016). And the limits on immigration that Leavers were inclined to press for are not clearly compatible with the EU’s commitment to freedom of movement of people throughout the EU. Of course, we must make a distinction here between immigration from places like Syria and

from places like Greece. The latter, but not the former, is arguably protected by the EU's charter.

The Remain campaign focused resolutely on broadly economic issues in the run up to the referendum. Cameron and other members of his administration warned repeatedly that leaving the EU would result in “economic chaos” and “destroy jobs and destroy livelihoods” (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 32). Even at this time, however, immigration was never far from the concerns of the Remainers. It was well-known, as we have seen, that the British electorate was foremost concerned about immigration. So the strategy adopted by the Remainers was to try to tie legitimate concerns about immigration together with their warnings about the effect of a Brexit on the British economy. Andrew Cooper was a key Remain strategist, working under Cameron, and he stated that “the in-play voters who worried about the economy also thought—in common with everyone else—that immigration was too high and should be reduced, that we should get control over immigration back from the EU and that if we did, and cut back the numbers, there would be positive benefits for the UK” (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 33). By “in-play voters”, of course, Cooper was referring to the considerable portion of the British electorate that was believed to be either undecided on the referendum, or at least capable of changing their minds if presented with the right arguments. Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of immigration, Remainers tended to think that the other side's concern with immigration was playing on the nascent racist tendencies in many Britons.

The Leavers were not as united, at least in the beginning, as were the Remainers in the messages that they sent to the British people. UKIP leader Nigel Farage had long insisted that immigration was out of control in the UK, especially now that membership in the EU meant that Britain was not completely in control of its own immigration policies. Farage stated publicly and repeatedly that an incessant focus on the issue of immigration could and would

propel the Leavers to victory in the referendum. Others took a slightly different approach. Dominic Cummings, the lead strategist for Vote Leave (one of the principal official campaigns urging the British people to vote to leave the EU), sought to make immigration the crucial issue in a way that did not seem to be quite as racist as Farage's statements were sometimes interpreted as being. Cummings gave a speech in which he stated what purported to be a fact supported by research—"A million last year, maybe two million this year—they have no idea whether these people are genuine refugees or asylum seekers, or economic migrants, or terrorists operating under the cover of either" (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 34). This comment brings into focus an unfortunate aspect of racial dialogue in the UK: Outright racist statements tend not to be tolerated, and to hurt the politicians who make them, while implying or stating that immigrants might be terrorists is taken to be acceptable; despite the fact that it is no more reasonable or factual than any other racist sentiment.

The Remainers, in their continuing claims of economic catastrophe that would befall the country if it should leave the EU, received support from a great many quarters, some of them with fine reputations. In Wales and Northern Ireland, for example, officials publicly predicted devastating local economic consequences that would ensue from a Brexit vote. Large technology companies associated with Cambridge issued similar warnings, as did the CEO of British Gas, who claimed in addition that leaving the EU would increase the energy bills that Britons had to pay each month. Similar concerns were issued from the Automobile Association and the chair of British Telecom (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 36).

It was not completely lost on the British public that both sides could not be correct here: it could not be the case both that leaving the EU, and remaining in it, would spell economic disaster. Most commentators have allowed that the Remainers were making claims about the economy that were more plausible than the claims made by the Leavers. For example, Vote Leave made a now infamous assertion to the effect that due to Britain's membership in the EU

“while one in four parents could not get their first choice of school locally and there was a shortage of local doctors, Britain was sending £350 million a week to Brussels [the headquarters of the EU]” (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 41). This claim, like others made by the Leavers, was never backed up with anything resembling empirical support.

In the final month of campaigning before the referendum each side of the debate had honed its message and was finding new ways to reach and persuade in-play voters. Leavers had learned to fasten upon the National Health Service, which was a concern for millions of British voters. It also enabled the Leavers to join together claims about the ill effects of immigration with more squarely economic concerns. Officials for the NHS were found who were willing to state publicly that immigration was “bleeding dry” the resources of the service, in part by “health tourists” (people who travel to foreign countries to access free or inexpensive health care services). Leavers made, in addition to the point about immigration and the NHS, two central arguments in the weeks prior to the referendum. First, Britain was claimed to be sending a fortune to the EU at regular intervals; and this was money that was not benefiting the British people in anything like it could if the money were directed at local services for residents of the UK. Second, fears about unemployment were stoked by the Leavers, who repeatedly suggested that migrant workers taking good jobs away from the British people (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 49). The day before the referendum, however, the Leavers did initiate a partial change in strategy. They began to make much more immoderate statements concerning immigration than they had done previously. Michael Gove gave a speech in which he asserted that Turkey and four other countries were set to join the EU as soon as 2020, and that this would result in as many as “5 million extra people entering the country, equivalent to four cities the size of Birmingham” (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 53). Again, there was little attempt to support the apocalyptic claims with evidence or proof.

Finally, Remainers doubled down on their strategy of issuing dire warning about the possible economic effects of leaving the EU. But they became aware, probably too late to do anything about it, that the message of the Leavers was getting through to the British people in a way that their own message was not. In response, Cameron and others simply increased the severity of their warnings, for example inviting the Trades Union Congress to report that if Britain left the EU, then by 2030 the average wage of British workers would be reduced by £38. Similarly, on the day before the vote, 1,300 of Britain's most senior business leaders were assembled to issue a warning that "Brexit would mean more uncertainty, less trade and fewer jobs" (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley 2017, p. 52).

In a contribution to a recent volume of essays in the Brexit vote, what it means, and what it could lead to in the future, Abby Innes (2018) discusses several issues that are germane to the present research effort. She begins by noting that

The Brexit vote represented, in the most part, a public reaction against radically increased material insecurity, frustration with political elites seen to collude with international business at the public expense, despair of public services wretched in regulatory red-tape and perverse decisions and, finally, austerity. (2018, p. 138)

This passage brings up some of the most crucial issues one must understand in analyzing the Brexit vote and what it tells us about the political will of the British people. Innes might have grouped together material insecurity with austerity, rather than separating them even notionally. For both of these conditions are direct results of the neoliberal economic programs that Britain (or, more accurately, its rulers) have embraced at least since the reign of Thatcher. However, she may well have been thinking that austerity is frequently put forward as the cure for economic ailments at the state- or nation-level; something to turn towards, as it were, after the damage of neoliberal policies has been done. And there is something to this idea. If we look at the example of Greece, for instance, it is quite clear that the austerity measures demanded by

the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and related organizations are in fact put into place, at least frequently, only after national economies have been wrecked, as has been the case in Greece. Nevertheless, it must always be born in mind that austerity is simply neoliberalism by another name, or at least the neoliberals' answer concerning how to deal with largely failed economies. Frustration with political elites is certainly a large part of the Brexit vote, as Innes argues, and can indeed be used to explain the related developments that were mentioned at the outset, such as the rise of far-right political parties in Europe and the election of an openly racist president in the US. To a large extent, votes for Brexit; for far-right parties in Germany, Austria, or France; and for the current US president should be viewed as “protest votes”—votes cast not so much in the confidence of the wisdom and virtue of the leader in question as in the hope that something, anything, different will be better than what has recently been endured.

Innes further argues that neoliberal economic policies have produced what she calls a “crisis of ungovernability”: a situation in which there is almost literally no hope, since the remedies proposed are simply further doses of the ideologies and policies that produced the dire economic situations in question (2018, p. 139). This odd situation has produced, again in the case of Greece but also elsewhere, an odd dilemma: since actual solutions to the problem are either ruled out of court as conflicting with orthodox economic “science”, or too far reaching to be practicable, even widely divergent political leaders and parties are sometimes left struggling to find issues to disagree about publicly. In Greece this situation has produced, quite paradoxically, social and policy changes that would be considered liberal by nearly every standard—such as the legalization of same sex marriage, the ability of a person to choose their own gender, and so forth—despite the fact that rule is nearly authoritarian. The situation is not as odd as it may seem, though it remains somewhat unfamiliar to orthodox political historians. In the US, for example, the conservative Republican party which has long done little but serve the interests of business and wealthy elites, found itself unable to secure the votes of much of

the population; no surprise, since its primary goal is to subvert the interests of the poor and middle-class to serve wealthy and elite interests. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the Republican party hit upon an ingenious expedient: it allied itself closely with religious zealots who opposed reproductive rights for women, wanted the Bible taught in biology classrooms, and favoured outlawing same-sex marriage. The Republican party sacrificed nothing that it fundamentally cared about, but gained a considerable portion of the electorate. This is not fundamentally different from what is happening in Greece and elsewhere. Wealthy elites, and those that do their bidding in the crafting of public policy, are simply doing whatever is necessary to stay in power. If this means taking a strong stand on social issues that they do not much care about, or which are even intellectually embarrassing, that is a small price to pay for remaining politically viable.

In the case of Britain, as Innes emphasizes, the situation is more complex, and it is consequently more difficult to find potential solutions to the manifold problems that elite politicians confront. She notes that neoliberalism is essentially a “supply side” set of ostensible solutions to economic and social problems. Supply side solutions, such as easing the tax burden on the wealthy, and on corporations, are alleged to benefit everyone in the end. If they have to pay less in taxes, then the wealthy will invest their savings in the economy, ultimately creating economic growth that benefits everyone in the end. This is an ingenious idea. For it implies that the best thing to do overall is to further enrich the already wealthy. Neoliberalism is only a more complex and far-reaching set of ideas than the simple notion of cutting taxes for the wealthy and for corporations. The only problem with the idea, as Innes stresses, is that it demonstrably does not work. Even if the wealthy do invest their windfalls from tax breaks they are as likely to invest it in the FIRE sector (Finance, Insurance and Real Estate) in ways that contribute nothing to the public good other than increased gaps between the wealthy and everyone else, or to invest it abroad, where nations typically have fewer pesky regulations and rules than do

wealthy nations such as the UK and the US. In either case the claimed benefit to the local economy and its denizens is non-existent. As Innes puts the point, “The problem is that very few supply-side reforms have worked on the terms by which they were publicly validated” (2018, p. 139). While this point is well-taken, it is also potentially naïve. It is at least arguable that very few supply-side economic initiatives actually have been publicly validated. As noted earlier, conservative politicians tend to be unable to pass legislation favouring supply-side ideas without the subterfuge of embracing social ideas that they care nothing about. And as for so-called “free trade agreements”, the great staple of neoliberalism, these tend to be negotiated and signed in secret. If it were otherwise, it would be obvious to everyone involved that they have nothing to do with free trade. As many have pointed out, “free-trade agreements” are not about freedom; not about trade; and are not really agreements. They are not about freedom because they tend to insist on a lack of economic protectionist measures only for “service countries”—countries assigned the exclusive economic role of supply wealthy countries with resources that the latter need. Wealthy countries like the US, and to a lesser extent the UK, continue to use protectionist measures in their own economies. Neoliberal ideology in practice is very much an instance of the policy of “do as I say, and not as I do”. They are not really about trade either. Instead, they are frequently primarily investor protection agreements; assurances that investors will be able to benefit from the free movement of capital, as it suits them, completely irrespective of the consequences for local economies and their populations. And they are not agreements, for two reasons. First, as noted, “free-trade agreements” are typically negotiated and signed in secret. Second, poor and poorer nations frequently have no choice but to sign them, if they want to survive economically. In this sense free-trade agreements are simply a relatively recent development in a long line of practices by which wealthy nations exploit poorer ones.

Three further points from Innes must be noted before we proceed. First, the UK is, just as the Leavers were enthusiastically pointed out in the run up prior to the Brexit referendum in 2016, experiencing a crisis in social care and the NHS. A recent survey by the organization YouGov found that over half of the UK's teachers plan to leave the professions within the next two years (2018, p. 142). This is an astonishing and alarming statistic. And it highlights something that the Leavers preferred not to mention, but which applies more broadly to alarmist calls concerning the NHS—the fact that there is a health care crisis in particular, and crises regarding social care in general, is not something that is simply an inevitable product of past events and policies. It is something that the government has allowed to happen. There is a multitude of ways to solve this problem, one of which would be simply to levy higher taxes on the wealthy. But this solution, and many others like it, is not considered a realistic option. Making crises such as these seem inevitable is a key tool of neoliberal ideology, as is the expedient of proposing austerity as the only solution to failing market economies.

Second, Innes points out that patterns in the Brexit vote have been found that are quite disturbing. “There were distinct patterns in the Brexit vote and the US election of 2016 of divergent voting preferences between the centres of the new knowledge economy—rooted in ICT [information and computing technologies]—and those of rural, industrial and mid-range technology economies” (2018, p. 145). According to this author, these patterns suggest a troublesome hypothesis: that deepening structural divisions in advanced capitalist economies between well-educated people, on one hand, “who feel able to self-insure in minimal or failing state conditions, and therefore prefer the dynamism of highly liberalised economies”, and those who have relatively little hope of achieving a substantial stake in that dynamic system, on the other (2018, p. 145). In other words, the better educated feel no personal need to change a system that has radically disenfranchised millions of citizens, residents, and voters. And those who have been disenfranchised have no obvious way to push for the alleviation of their

condition. One way to frame the issue is to view wealthy elites and corporations as implicitly bribing the better educated, but still non-wealthy voters in relevant nations with the promise of stable but modest earnings in exchange for their cooperation in securing the devastation of everyone else involved.

The third crucial point from Innes is that there is something operative in the foregoing considerations that is inimical to the proper functioning of democracy. When discontent and anxiety are the motivating factors in a tendency on the part of the electorate, as they undoubtedly were in the case of the Brexit referendum, democracies function poorly (2018, p. 148). This is because of two factors. One is that it is relatively easy for politicians, other elites, and the media to manipulate discontent and anxiety to accomplish whatever they are independently motivated to accomplish. Innes gives the example here of how a fake crisis concerning immigration was mobilised to elect the current US president. It requires being relatively educated and well-informed to see that there is not a crisis of immigration in America. But people are highly susceptible to manipulation and exploitation when they know that they are discontented but do not understand why. Second, as the debate prior to the Brexit referendum amply illustrated, even if it is understood that the central problems facing an electorate as a whole have one principal cause, such as a failing economy, there is far too much room for politicians and wealthy elites to manoeuvre in such a framework. Thus, as we saw earlier, both the Leavers and the Remainers focused somewhat heavily on economic issues, even while offering differing and even contradictory verdicts concerning what is to be done.

Immigration and Neoliberalism

The main issues involved in Brexit have now been identified in one way or another: immigration, the economy, and the issue of British sovereignty. This section will introduce the arguments that have been provided in the extensive literature on Brexit in attempting to explain the vote to leave the EU. Some additional considerations that appear to have influenced voters will also be described.

Matti and Zhou (2017) provide a powerful discussion that attempts to illustrate the considerations of political economy that lay behind the Brexit vote. They note a couple of points that were mentioned above. Those who voted to leave the EU appear to have been decisively influenced by considerations of national sovereignty and immigration; while those who voted to remain were sensitive to matters pertaining to the economic risks of leaving the EU, including the dangers of “isolation” (potentially being excluded from, or having to negotiate new trade agreements and related phenomena). Matti and Zhou point out that the demographics of the vote offer important clues concerning which considerations influenced which types of voters. They write that “The voting blocs were defined along demographic lines with older, less educated, lower social status and rural citizens forming the leave campaign” (2017, p. 1131). From a certain perspective, this is precisely what one would expect. For as was noted above the Leave campaign appealed heavily to voters’ fears and prejudices, and, in general, the types of voters these authors mention are more likely to be responsive to a fear-based campaign and influenced by prejudices.

Using an empirical study that includes crucial reference to the actual voting patterns of various parts of the British electorate, Matti and Zhou draw a couple of key conclusions. First, “Overall economic interests both for trade, freedom from regulation and employment appear to have little relevance to explaining the leave vote” (2017, p. 1133). One possible reason for this is that the economy was not a crucial consideration for many voters. Another possibility,

however, is that, as we saw above, both the Leave and Remain campaigns stressed, in their different ways, the economic consequences of Britain leaving the EU. So even voters who were concerned about the economy may not have seen it as a crucial consideration in their decisions. Second, the authors point out that “anti-immigration sentiment [was] a key factor in the referendum” (p. 1133). One could argue that the same is true of immigration as the economy—both sides appealed to it and, therefore, it cannot have been a crucial consideration. However, there is no doubt but that the Leave campaign appealed more directly to immigration than did the Remain campaign, and it made much less of an effort to pretend that racial and ethnic prejudices were not operative in the discussion. Finally, Matti and Zhou offer the following parting thought: “the results [of the referendum] are indicative of an aging UK population seeking isolation from the national, racial, and religious diversity associated with globalization” (pp. 1133-4).

There are two points to highlight from this important discussion. One is that population age is prominently mentioned. A possible explanation for Brexit that has not perhaps been given the discussion it merits is that a newer generation of British voters differ from their older compatriots on issues central to Brexit. This seems to be correct, but not in the way that those who have viewed Brexit as a partial result of younger Britons’ differences with older British people. Instead, it is the older members of the electorate who supported Brexit, with younger members being less influenced by issues of sovereignty and immigration. The other point to note is the mention of globalisation. As we will see, many have argued that neoliberal economic policies were indirectly responsible for the Brexit vote. The idea is that these policies have produced extensive wealth and income inequality; and this inequality has led to frustration with the status quo. It is well-known that racial prejudices and other concerns about immigration are much more salient when economic times are hard as when they are good. So neoliberalism produces an economic discontent that led many Britons to make what amounted to a “protest

vote”. However, the mention of globalisation complicates this matter. For while globalization and neoliberalism are closely linked, the former is associated with multiculturalism and ethnic and religious diversity in ways that the latter is not.

Other attempted explanations for the Brexit vote highlight the sort of “Euroscepticism” that has long characterised prominent swathes of the British population. Carl, Dennison and Evans (2019), for example, write that “existing explanations of the UK’s vote to leave cannot account for Britons’ long-standing Euroscepticism” (p. 282). These authors intend to oppose explanations that appeal to certain alternative factors, such as the UK’s lower scores on measures of economic inequality and austerity (“austerity” is a commonly used term to describe the consequences, for the general populations of states and nations, of neoliberal economic policies; they commonly involve reductions in public spending on social welfare programs, privatization of services formerly provided by the state, and so one); authoritarian values; and even some more specific concerns about immigration.

Carl, Dennison and Evans (2019) also provide more specific criticisms of alternative explanations for the Brexit vote. One such explanation is that the Leave campaign essentially lied to voters, and “won by pretending that there are simple answers to our problems” (p. 284). A particular lie that is often pointed to here is the baseless claim, mentioned earlier, that the UK sends hundreds of millions of pounds to Brussels every week; a claim that was criticized by the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority. Carl, Dennison and Evans find this explanation for Brexit inadequate. One reason is that statistical studies appear to have shown that the wilder claims of the Leavers did not have much substantive impact on electorate behaviour. Indeed, another reason to doubt the explanation is that “the balance of support for Leave versus Remain did not change much during the two years prior to the referendum” (p. 284). This point, however, is open to dispute. For notice that if the argument is sound then we could infer—unacceptably—that no issue discussed during the debates was important for voters. In any case, the chief point

that Carl, Dennison and Evans want to make is that the proposed explanation does not square well with the fact that the UK was, and is, by far the most Eurosceptical country in the EU.

A second proposed explanation these authors consider is that the Brexit vote was largely “a proxy for voters’ frustrations over low living standards, income inequality and cuts to public services” (2019, p. 284). Notice that this explanation is very close to the kind of explanation that appeals to the results of neoliberal economic policies and the austerity measures that they frequently involve. It also implies that the British government, at least to the extent that it was aware of the true causes of increased economic inequality and decreased levels of social spending, sought to blame instead immigration and the EU for the relevant economic problems. The basic idea behind this deception would be that elite interests, which are either shared by most politicians or enjoyed by those who contribute to their campaigns, would be imperilled by abandoning neoliberal economic policies. So it is in the interests of the elites to misdirect the public on the matter. Carl, Dennison and Evans reject this explanation as well: “Although poorer areas of the UK were indeed more likely to support Leave, measures of Euroscepticism show little correlation with measures of inequality and austerity across EU member states ... In addition, neither ‘austerity’ nor ‘inequality’ was among the most frequently cited reasons for voting Leave” (2019, p. 285).

These objections to the neoliberal-centred explanation for the Brexit vote are unconvincing. First, the authors’ insistence that Euroscepticism be accounted for in any explanation of the results of the referendum is question begging. Their own view, of course, is that Euroscepticism is central to explaining the Brexit vote. But they need to argue for this view. To assume that all explanations must include this consideration is to presuppose what the authors need to show. So it is not a pertinent criticism of the neoliberal-centred approach that inequality and austerity do not correlate nicely with the degree of Euroscepticism that a given European nation exhibits. Second, it is irrelevant that few voters actually mentioned inequality

or austerity in explaining why they voted as they did. For this to be relevant it would have to be the case that all the pertinent voters were fully aware of why they feel as they do; and it would also have to be the case that most or all voters are aware of neoliberal economic policies, and their deleterious consequences that they have for nearly all people other than wealthy elites and large corporations. There is no reason to think that either of these things is true. Certainly the authors do not do enough to show otherwise. It should be noted that Carl, Dennison and Evans (2019) also consider an explanation that they call the “losers of globalisation” explanation. For present purposes, this explanation is not a competitor of the neoliberal-focused explanation, but simply another aspect of it.

A fourth and final explanation that Carl, Dennison, and Evans consider is that Leave voters had predominantly authoritarian values while Remain voters were more oriented to liberal values. The authors allow that there is something to this explanation, as they do in the case of the “losers of globalization” explanation. Nevertheless, they reject each of these (and would presumably reject even a combination of the two) explanations, at least if it is taken to be the last word in explaining the Brexit vote. The reason they reject them is that each one attempts to explain a “national-level” phenomenon (the vote itself) in terms of “sub-national level variance within the UK itself. When these explanations are tested using cross-national data, they do not receive empirical support” (2019, pp. 285-6). What the authors mean by this is that individuals who have lost out from globalisation can be found in greater numbers in other European nations that are less Eurosceptical.

Again, these arguments are highly problematic. The authors again assume, without any significant level of argument, that Euroscepticism is a key variable in explaining the Brexit vote. To assume this is simply to beg the question—it is to assume as true something that one’s opponents obviously reject. Moreover, the idea that we cannot explain national level voting patterns by voters’ attitudes toward issues flies in the face of obvious reality. People vote as

they do for reasons. These reasons are presumably always “sub-national”. It is quite simply absurd to suppose that voters’ reasons and ideologies cannot help to explain national-level voting patterns or voting results.

An author who takes up both the “losers of globalisation” explanation and combines it with the explanation that appeals to issues involving authoritarianism is Jessop (2017), though he does not use the label “losers of globalisation”. Jessop sees the Brexit vote as one important symptom in a more general “continuing organic crisis” of the British state (p. 133); as well as a stimulus for struggles over Britain’s place in Europe and the rest of the world. The same crisis, for Jessop, previously enabled “the rise of Thatcherism as a neoliberal and neoconservative project [...] with an authoritarian populist appeal and authoritarian statist tendencies” (p. 133). This is an important point, since neoliberalism was indeed born (at least in Britain) during the rise of Thatcherism. It is less clear what the connection to authoritarianism may be. Perhaps Jessop is thinking of the fact that populist-inclined voters and politicians see less value in the political participation of the masses so long as certain issues (such as immigration) are properly attended to. The term “neoconservatism” requires brief comment here. As noted several times, neoliberalism is the view that economic markets, both at home and on the international scene, should be fully open to trade and the movement of capital, and free from governmental interference in the form of protectionist measures such as tariffs or in the form of regulations such as safety and environmental regulations. Neoconservatism is a very different matter. It concerns the appropriateness of a state’s intervention, including military intervention, on the world stage. Still, it is not inappropriate to group them together as Jessop does. For Thatcher not only ushered in and fervently supported neoliberal economic policies, but also engaged in colonialism, such as in the Falkland Conflict of 1982. The appropriateness of such colonialism or imperialism is precisely what neoconservatism is concerned to preach.

Only a brief consideration of Jessop's own hybrid explanation of Brexit can be provided here. He makes a very valuable initial point that warrants our attention. When Cameron took on the responsibility of rectifying the Conservative party's errors of judgment, in the decade leading up to the Brexit referendum, Jessop notes that he did not expect to have to fulfill this promise. There were two reasons that he would ultimately be held to account here. First, the "power bloc"—essentially the maintenance of the de facto two party system that had long persisted in British politics—"had lost control over public opinion, the hinge between political and civil society, regarding the European Union" (2017, p. 134). Essentially what this means is that the British public had stopped taking the two parties' word for matters pertaining to the desirability of the UK's involvement in Europe, and all the issues that are related to this relationship. Second, "charismatic men of destiny" such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson had emerged to challenge the social and political status quo in Britain. This point is significant not only intrinsically, but because far-right and fascist political parties have long depended on the charisma of their leaders. Those sympathetic with these social and political agendas tend to be irrational to begin with, and therefore are more likely to be swayed by substantively irrelevant considerations such as the charisma of leaders. The subsequent election of Johnson to the office of Prime Minister, as incredible as it might seem, is precisely a confirmation that British politics has lost its way in respects that Jessop details. While the comparisons between Johnson and US president Trump may not be fully justified, the two do share in common what appears in a vacuum to be a very odd property indeed—each has been given a mandate by the people to counteract the precise tendencies and policies that made each man wealthy and powerful in the first place. In other words, the British and American people inexplicably fail to understand that the establishment, which they so fervently oppose, was a necessary ingredient for the creation of the leaders that they now somehow expect to dismantle it.

Jessop's primary contribution to the debate over the origins of the Brexit referendum is to focus attention on the neoliberal economic policies of the British government and the failure of these policies to satisfy the public. Of course, it could be objected that the policies were never intended to satisfy the British public. They were intended to enrich the already wealthy, and hence to maintain and increase the vast economic inequality that exists between social classes. This is true but irrelevant. The British people were not insensitive about the effects of these policies, however relatively inarticulate they might be about the details and the overall message. Jessop points out that none of the economic policies that the current British administration supports has any chance at all of remedying the kinds of concerns that led so many to vote to leave the European Union. He writes that "The dominance of neoliberalism indicates that the choice posed in the referendum was misleading: the real choice should have been in or out of neoliberalism rather than in or out of the European Union" (2017, p. 137). Of course, this bald statement underestimates the significance of two points. First, there was and is no mechanism by which neoliberalism could have been judged by the electorate. Second, the wealthy elites would never allow such a mechanism to come into existence in the first place. This is the central reason why so-called "Free Trade Agreements" are nearly always negotiated in secret, with the public being told as little as possible about them. Their very purpose, like that of neoliberalism itself, is to enable and legitimize the further enrichment of the already rich, at the expense of everyone else.

More on Neoliberalism

The central thesis of this paper is that economic disenfranchisement combined with concerns about immigration to produce a climate in which the UK could vote to leave the EU. This section will explain in more detail precisely what neoliberalism is and how it has produced economic disenfranchisement on a massive scale. This explanation will, in turn, apply as well to the other two events that this paper is concerned to discuss: the rise of the far right in Europe, and the election of the current US president. The reasons in all three cases are broadly similar, though some differences exist as well and must be acknowledged.

In his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey provides the most comprehensive discussion of the topic in the literature to date, despite the fact that the book is now somewhat dated. In line with what has been said here about the origins of neoliberalism, Harvey notes that the period 1978-1980 was a turning point for the world in the area of political economy. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping liberalised China's economy in certain ways to produce a kind of capitalist/communist hybrid. Since that time China has witnessed extraordinary economic growth, with many predicting that it will soon have the world's largest economy. In Britain, Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister in 1979 "with a mandate to curb trade union power and put an end to the miserable inflationary stagflation" (Harvey 2005, p. 1). Stagflation is the combination of high inflation, high unemployment, and low economic growth. Thatcher also famously proclaimed that there is no such thing as society. If this were true, she implicitly reasoned, then social needs do not exist over and above the needs of particular individuals; and government spending should reflect this fact. Finally, in the US, Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 and had a broadly similar message and agenda—government, he argued, is not the solution to social problems; government is itself the problem. Reagan, who combined forces with Paul Volcker who commanded the US Federal Reserve,

sought to “curb the power of labour, deregulate industry, agriculture, and resource extraction, and liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage” (Harvey 2005, p. 1).

These moves are precisely the implementation of neoliberal economic policies. Neoliberalism is the view that economic markets should be fully open and free from government interference. A corollary of the view is that industries should be privatised wherever possible. As Harvey explains,

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate for such practices. (Harvey 2005, p. 2)

There are two things to say concerning this passage and the propositions that it advances. First, while it is certainly true that neoliberalism is a theory of political economy, it has always strained to depict itself as apolitical. The idea that economics, or neoliberal economics, is a science and has nothing to do with politics has been central to the doctrine’s success. This also explains the otherwise curious phenomenon that when neoliberal ideas fail badly, as they frequently do, the solutions put in place are most often simply more neoliberalism. An example is the imposition of austerity measures in Greece after its economy collapsed following the 2008 worldwide economic recession. Second, Harvey could have stated in the final sentence of the passage that, vis-à-vis the economy, the state has the role described and no other. According to neoliberalism, the state should stay out of the economy as much as is possible.

The most dramatic illustration of the effects of economic neoliberalism were exhibited in Chile in 1973. The particular conditions in that nation at the time allowed for a kind of economic experiment that had been dreamed about by Chicago-school economists; but no one

ever thought they would have the opportunity to shape an economy completely according to “free-market ideals” (the term “free-market” will sometimes be used here as a synonym for “neoliberal”). Salvador Allende, the democratically elected president of Chile, was taken out of power by the US because his socialist ideals were going to be bad for the profits of US corporations. After largely destroying what was left of Chile’s economy after decades of exploitation at the hands of the US and others, Chicago economists led by Milton Friedman were sent to Chile to rebuild its economy according to neoliberal principles. Resources and industries were privatised, labour protections removed, and restrictions on foreign direct investment were lifted. The results of all of this were skyrocketing inflation and great social unrest. Finally, General Pinochet, who was not known for his compassion, forced Friedman to stop implementing neoliberal policies as the nation descended into chaos (Harvey 2005, pp. 8-9). To this day, however, the “Chile experiment” is frequently touted as a success. This shows the incredible hegemony of neoliberal ideology—many simply cannot understand the proposition that the ideology is flawed or has failed (Harvey 2005, p. 10).

Harvey contrasts neoliberalism with what he calls “embedded liberalism” (2005, p. 11). This is essentially the kind of political economy that the UK and the US had in the decades immediately following the Second World War. Trade was largely open and free, but the government provided many services and enacted many regulations intended to prevent the people from being ruthlessly exploited by business interests. Embedded liberalism was, however, viewed as a threat to industry, to the wealthy, and to large corporations. The stagflation of the 1970s, which arguably had little or nothing to do with the principles of embedded liberalism, was seized upon by elites as an opportunity to do away with embedded liberalism and replace it with neoliberal principles. The effects of this reversal were dramatic and easily illustrated. As Harvey notes, in both the UK and the US the income and wealth of the top 1% of earners has more than doubled since 1982; while the real wages (wages adjusted

for inflation) of lower- and middle-class people are roughly the same as they were in the 1970s (Harvey 2005, p. 17); and have in fact dropped if we factor in the loss of adequate health insurance and other benefits. In other words, neoliberal policies have seen to it that the benefits of the economic growth that both nations have experienced in the last half-century went nearly exclusively to the wealthy. This is a key factor in the explanation that is offered here concerning the Brexit vote. The Remain campaign was offering no real change for the millions of economically disenfranchised Britons. Whatever the risks and pitfalls of leaving the EU might be, it was surely worth trying something different given that the alternative was simply more of the same. To a large extent, it will be argued later, the Brexit vote was a kind of “protest vote”—precisely as many Americans voted for Trump simply as a way of registering their disgust for what had come to seem normal and practically inevitable in the US political economy (Lopez, 2017).

Harvey shows that it is not simply a coincidence that, during the neoliberal period, wealth and income inequality dramatically widened. He distinguishes two ways of framing the purpose or function of neoliberalism. The first is the official story, according to which neoliberalism is a “utopian project” with the purpose of reorganizing international capitalism. The second, which he thinks is much more accurate, is neoliberalism as “a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (Harvey 2005, p. 19). What he means here by “restore” is to get back to the pre-Great Depression days when capital was not regulated and protections for customers and workers largely did not exist. In other words, to restore the economic order that embedded liberalism had displaced in the decades following the Depression and then the Second World War (Harvey 2005, pp. 19-20).

A further word is in order concerning precisely how Thatcher, in the early 1980s, instituted neoliberal ideals and practices. Thatcher was heavily influenced by Keith Joseph, an

activist associated with the neoliberal “think tank”, Institute of Economic Affairs. Under his instruction or advice, Thatcher sought to abandon Keynesianism completely. Keynesianism is a doctrine about the role of government in the economy, named after the great British economist John Maynard Keynes. Keynes had argued that the government should, on certain types of occasions, effect fiscal policy concerning the economy. This can mean different things, but one prominent example of such fiscal policy is the government creation of jobs during or after a recession. Fiscal policy is to be distinguished from monetary policy, or the government adjustment of interest rates for loans. Truly hardcore neoliberals, such as the members of the so-called “Austrian School” of economics, hold that the government should engage in neither fiscal nor monetary policy with respect to the economy. Thatcher and Reagan were not quite this radical, rejecting only the use of fiscal policy. For her part, Thatcher “signalled a fierce determination to have done with the institutions and political ways of the social democratic state that had been consolidated in Britain after 1945” (Harvey 2005, pp. 22-23). “Social democratic” is a synonym, as Harvey uses it, for “embedded liberal”.

Among the ways that Thatcher instituted neoliberal ideals and policies are the following: attacking organised labour; reducing taxes, especially on the wealthy; rolling back or even dismantling various aspects of the welfare state in Britain; privatising public enterprises, such as social housing; and creating favourable conditions for foreign direct investment in the country, in part by lifting restrictions on the flow of capital in and out of the UK. Thatcher’s rhetoric matched the far-reaching nature of the reforms that she instituted, for example when she remarked that “Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul” (Harvey 2005, p. 23). What the changes and reforms mentioned all share in common is that they served to further enrich wealthy elites. The official story, of course, is that by making these changes and reforms, the British economy would grow stronger. Yet economic growth is not necessarily a worthy end in itself if only the wealthy and large corporations benefit from it. This is one of

the principal lessons that one should take from the effects, currently felt, of decades of neoliberal economic policies at home and abroad (Harvey 2005, p. 24).

A question that must occur to any reflective person who confronts these issues is why the people of Britain, or of the US, would agree to the implementation of economic policies and ideologies that were virtually certain to harm them in the long run. One answer is simply that the people were reassured, at nearly every step along the way, that the policies were good for everyone. Citing economic dogma as if it were impartial science was another strategy for convincing people to vote, in effect, against their own economic interests. It is noteworthy that in the neoliberal period, economics departments and courses in many universities around the world, especially in Britain and the US, simply stopped teaching alternative economic theories and even the history of the subject. In this way it was made to seem as if alternatives to neoliberalism either did not exist, or required the abandonment of basic capitalist economic principles and the institution of something like socialism or communism. As Harvey explains, since the people would not willingly embrace policies, or politicians, who would act against the people's interests, consent had to be manufactured or constructed. In Chile or Argentina, neoliberal reforms could be and were instituted by force. But in the UK or US, which are ostensible democracies, this handy expedient was not available. Harvey writes that,

The channels through which popular consent was created were diverse. Powerful ideological influences circulated through the corporations, the media, and the numerous institutions that constitute civil society—such as universities, schools, churches, and professional associations ... [as well as] the organisation of think-tanks (with corporate backing and funding), the capture of certain segments of the media, and the conversion of many intellectuals to neoliberal ways of thinking, created a climate of opinion in support of neoliberalism as the exclusive guarantor of freedom. (2005, p. 40)

Now it can certainly be wondered why exactly it is that neoliberalism's promise—effectively the idea that benefiting the wealthy will end up benefiting everyone—has not been kept. There are probably as many answers to this question as there are specific neoliberal policies. But we can say something at a more general level about why the policies end up benefiting only the wealthy. Take again the list of reforms put into place in the UK under Thatcher and largely kept in place by subsequent Prime Ministers and their administrations. Reducing taxes inevitably increases the relative burden on the non-wealthy because the proportion of the taxes they pay relative to the level of expenditures necessary to sustain life is much higher than it is for the wealthy. By attacking organised labour, Thatcher virtually ensured that middle-class and lower-class wages for Britons would stagnate or even fall over time. It has repeatedly been demonstrated that organised labour is one of the only ways to ensure that wages increase or are not cut over time even correcting for inflation. By creating an investment climate in Britain favourable to foreign direct investment Thatcher created a situation in which foreign capital can come and go as it pleases, according to whatever is that creates most profit, completely irrespective of the effects of capital inflows and capital flight on the British people. And by severely weakening the social welfare state in the UK Thatcher and others made it immensely more difficult for the poor and the disadvantaged to achieve anything like a comfortable life (Harvey 2005, p. 25-27).

At the root of neoliberalism, as well as the root of conservatism more generally, is the idea that anyone who tries and works hard enough can succeed, and indeed can become wealthy. This is the justification for many of the reforms, after all. If success is simply a matter of diligence and effort then it does not make sense to give public funds or services to the poor; and it does not make sense to tax the wealthy heavily, since one is thereby effectively punishing them for their success. The problem is that the assumption here is certainly false—success is largely, arguably predominantly, determined by factors over which individuals have no control.

Once one sees the emptiness of the assumption that lies at the root of neoliberal ideology it is a fairly simple matter to understand by neoliberal policies benefit only the wealthy and harm everyone else (Harvey 2005, p. 33).

Neoliberalism and the Far Right

On the assumption that the argument concerning neoliberalism is correct, what are the social and political consequences of its abject failure to benefit everyone? One obvious effect is the series of economic crises that have been regularly occurring since the 1970s. The 2008 recession, for example, was demonstrably a result of the weakening or destruction of regulations on the activities of banks, especially regulations that had prevented banks that take deposits from customers from engaging in speculative and risky investment schemes. As Harvey notes, as a result of neoliberal policies, “Financial crises were both endemic and contagious” (2005, p. 94). Incidentally, the point about financial crises shows that the situation for the non-wealthy in European nations and the US is actually much worse than neoliberalism simply failing to benefit the non-wealthy. For financial crises, especially banking crises, end up being paid for by the non-wealthy. Even worse, they are commonly blamed on profligate spending by national governments instead of on the actual guilty parties, the banks. Nations are routinely subject to austerity measures, which quite obviously harm the non-wealthy much more than the wealthy elites, in response to crises and difficulties created by the wealthy. All of this amounts to what is sometimes called “economic pollution”—economic messes made by banks, corporations, and wealthy individuals that the rest of us must pay to clean up (Harvey 2005, p. 190).

It is time to confront the effects of decades of neoliberal policies on the remarkable rise of far-right parties in Europe, of which the recent election of Boris Johnson to the office of British Prime Minister may be regarded as a special case. One intriguing discussion of neoliberalism and Brexit speculates that with the referendum neoconservatism “has come to trump (if you’ll pardon the verb) neoliberalism” (Hay, 2018). Unfortunately, usage of the terms “neoliberalism” and “neoconservatism” is not uniform. Hay himself is admirably clear about how he uses “neoliberalism”. It refers to an ideology that displays supreme confidence in the

market as an efficient mechanism for the allocation of resources; that stresses the importance of free trade and free capital mobility; and that sees the state as a hindrance, rather than a help, for economic matters and problems (Hay, 2018). This is very close to how Harvey understands the term, and the way it is used here. “Neoconservatism” is more difficult to define, but it designates something like the appropriateness of expansionary military policy. Thus, Tony Blair’s highly unpopular support of the 2003 American invasion and occupation of Iraq was an instance of neoconservatism at work. So why does Hay think that neoconservatism has come to trump neoliberalism in the context of consideration of Brexit? Here is what he has to say on the matter:

There is not much we can say about Brexit if we choose to look at Brexit as a symptom of neoliberalism alone; but there is quite a lot that we can say about both Brexit and neoliberalism if we see the latter as never existing on its own but as articulated with other things and if we think no so much in terms of neoliberalism tout court, but in terms of neoliberalization and its counter-tendencies. (Hay, 2018)

The problem with this suggestion, at least at first glance, is that it involves a conflation of levels of influence and analysis. It might be plausible that neoconservatism, or strands of it, were partly responsible for Brexit. The idea would have to be that there is a connection between neoconservative strands in the ideas of the British people were partly responsible for the assertion of national sovereignty and British exceptionalism that the Brexit vote arguably evinced. However, if this is what Hay has in mind it is in no tension with the assertion that neoliberalism was also responsible for the decision on the referendum. This is because if neoliberalism was an active force it was so only indirectly, by means of the effects on most British people of neoliberal economic policies for decades prior to the vote. In other words, it might be the case that the electorate as a whole was influenced by neoconservative thinking; but it is not neoliberal thinking that led to Brexit (if the analysis presented in this paper is

correct), but the effects of neoliberal policies that led to the feelings of economic disenfranchisement which led to the Leave campaign emerging victorious in 2016.

Hay presents a list of ten “paradoxes of Brexit”. While there is no space here to consider all of these, some of them are directly relevant to the present discussion and so will be briefly considered. First, Hay claims that in Brexit “the political imperative” trumped “all economic imperatives” (2018). By this he appears to mean that concerns over immigration, a clearly political issue, overcame worries about the possible economic effects for Britain of leaving the EU. This seems to me to be mistaken. As we have seen, both the Leavers and the Remainers had a good deal to say about the potential economic effects of Brexit. Hay’s point would be correct only if concern about the economy was somehow side-lined in favour of cutting back on immigration by leaving the EU, and hence asserting jurisdiction on the question of which immigrants and migrants would be allowed into the UK. But this did not happen. Each side argued that its choice on the referendum was economically superior to that of the other side. Therefore, Hay’s first paradox is not a paradox at all.

Second, Hay claims that it is a paradox that the idea of a “strong state” overcame neoliberalism’s concern for a free and open economy (2018). Again, this seems to be confused. Leaving the EU does not mean that Britain will no longer follow the principles of free trade. It does indicate, however, that Hay means something different than what is being argued here by the assertion that neoliberalism was (at least partially) responsible for Brexit. He seems to think that many British people were either guided by, or chose to ignore, neoliberal economic ideas. For all that has been and will be argued here, this might be true. It does seem doubtful that most of the British people have a clear understanding of what neoliberalism is and how it functions. But there is no reason to take a stand on the matter in this context. To reiterate, the claim advanced and supported in this paper is that the effects of neoliberalism led to the Brexit vote; not that neoliberal ideas were (or were not) operative in the minds of the voters. We must

conclude that this second example is not a genuine paradox any more than the first one considered is.

Third, and finally, Hay suggests that “in a similarly paradoxical vein, Brexit might also be seen either to herald the return of protectionism (or at least the expression of a protectionist reflex) after four decades in which the mantras of liberalization have predominated” (2018). Once again, it is simply not true that Brexit means the end of free trade, or a return to its antithesis, which is protectionist economic measures undertaken by the government. The point of considering the final would-be paradox is not simply to criticise Hay, however, but to note an important point that arises in consideration of this third example of an alleged paradox. There is a large difference between preaching neoliberal economic ideals, on one hand, and actually abiding by the principles of free trade, on the other. Wealthy countries tend to do the first but not the second. The point is worth briefly expanding upon. Since the case of the US is clearer in this context, and since it tends to shout about the importance of free trade the loudest, it will be considered as an example.

The US does not now have, nor has it ever had, a truly free market economy. This is quite obvious today, given the trade war that is being fought with China, but the point is much deeper than this one piece of evidence would suggest. America has a highly protectionist economy. It provides subsidies for agriculture, aeronautics, and information-technologies, for example. Even in the context of a so-called “free trade agreement” such as NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), the US routinely violates the principles of free trade. An example is the price minimums that are set on tomatoes bought in the US. Tomato producers in Florida cannot compete with Mexico. The principles of free trade dictate that buyers would simply buy the Mexican product and that the Florida producers would simply go out of business due to their inability to withstand market discipline. But of course this is not what happens. The US sets price minimums that enable the Florida producers to be competitive with Mexico. What

this and similar examples are illustrative of is the fact that it is always other nations, usually poor nations, that are pressured to open their economies to competition. Wealthy nations like the US and the UK simply ignore the principles of free trade when it suits them to do so. This is an instance of the old adage about capitalism and socialism. In wealthy countries, the rule is: capitalism for the poor and socialism for the rich. What neoliberals oppose is not government hand-outs, but only hand-outs that go to the poor rather than the wealthy. The correlate on the international scene would be “neoliberalism for poor nations, and protectionism for wealthy nations” (Johnston, 2007).

A better but still unorthodox presentation of the view that neoliberalism led to Brexit is presented by Holscher and Howard-Jones (2018). Like Hay, these authors argue that neoliberalism affected the Brexit vote directly, through the “increasing dominance of the neoliberal wing of the Conservative party” (p. 1), rather than indirectly, as has been argued here. They suggest that the dominance of this wing signals that there will be a continuation of neoliberal policies and effects of those policies, including migration control, the continuation of free-market economic policies, increasing inequality, stagnating income, a “low tax low wage economy”, and deteriorating public services (2018, p. 1). Comments are in order on these suggestions. First, it is not obvious what migration control has to do with neoliberalism. Migration control has to do with how to respond to certain sorts of people; this is not clearly an economic issue. Indeed, we can go further than this. Central to the idea of neoliberal ideology is the idea that labour, as well as capital, ought to be as mobile as possible. So restricting migration, especially migratory workers, is inimical to neoliberal ideology. Holscher and Howard-Jones could object that they are describing the Conservative party, and that this party does support migration control. However, this objection does not succeed since the avowed purpose of the passages is to explain why the increasing dominance of the neoliberal wing of the Conservative party will lead to the continuation of neoliberal economic ideas and policies.

Second, these authors are correct that neoliberalism tends to lead to deteriorating public services, but we should be explicit about why this is. The main reason is that public expenditures that are not necessary to maintain order and protect private property, or that are necessary for national security and safety, are strongly discouraged by neoliberalism. Spending public funds maintaining public services is not necessary for any of these objectives. Another reason, related to the first, is that any necessary services according to neoliberalism should be privatised. So public services, almost as a simple matter of definition, are not going to receive attention by those persuaded of neoliberal ideals. We can also say that there is a distinct pattern concerning what neoliberals think should, and should not, be subsidised by the government. Neoliberals nearly always oppose public spending on resources that the wealthy do not use or do not need. In the case of public services, there are usually alternatives available for the wealthy; and this is one chief reason that public services are allowed to deteriorate or even to stop functioning (Harvey, 2005).

Holscher and Howard-Jones are concerned to explain a phenomenon that they maintain is little acknowledged in the contemporary debate over the causes and effects of Brexit. The choice the British people are given, they hold, is between more neoliberalism with the certain effects detailed above, on one hand, and a “competing ideology that will result in the nationalisation of the utilities and the railway system, the regulation of capital, necessitating some element of control to prevent flight, the deregulation of labour, increased taxation ... and provisions enacted to facilitate wealth distribution” (2018, p. 1). The authors maintain that neither of these alternatives should be appealing to the majority of the electorate. This claim is not perspicuously made. The talk of what “should” be appealing to the electorate suggests a normative claim; a claim about the sort of political economy we ought to have, or to strive for. However, the talk of the majority of the electorate suggests a purely descriptive claim; a claim about how people are likely to feel about these two options. In short, it is not obvious what

Holscher and Howard-Jones are saying here. As a descriptive claim their assertion might be true, but it is not obviously relevant to the question of what a post-Brexit world should look like. As a normative claim, it lacks all foundation. There is certainly nothing obviously wrong with nationalisation, increased taxation, or restrictions on capital movement. Indeed, they would appear to be precisely what is needed to repair the extensive damage done to society by neoliberalism. Nevertheless, arguing this point is not necessary or possible in the present context.

It remains only to observe two further points that Holscher and Howard-Jones make about Brexit. First, they make the insightful point that those who favour a “hard Brexit”—essentially, a Brexit with no formalised deal with trading partners in the EU, and no provisions guaranteeing the movement of people into the UK—are radical neoliberals (2018, p. 5). This may be true. And it also brings up an important point that has not been made thus far in the present discussion. There is something antithetical to neoliberal principles about certain ways in which the EU functions on an economic level. It has in the past had quotas on products like sugar, and quotas are a form of protectionism that violate the principles of free trade. Quotas are normally used to protect industries, such as agriculture, from low prices. They are similar to the minimum price levels mentioned earlier in the context of discussion of NAFTA and American forms of protectionism. The difference is that buyers agree to purchase a certain quantity (a quota) or number of goods irrespective of the actual prices. Quotas and minimum prices are just different ways of accomplishing the same goal, which is to protect industries from market discipline (Johnston, 2007). So there is actually some truth to the claim that neoliberal politicians tend to dislike the EU. The reason that this is not an objection to the thesis of the present paper is that elite politicians, the sort of people who may have considered views on neoliberalism, did not make the decision to leave the EU: the British people did. Hence, the most we could say here in respect of explaining the Brexit vote is that the Leavers who

campaigns for Brexit in the run up to the referendum were partially motivated by neoliberal ideals. No doubt this had an impact on the decision to leave the EU. But it cannot explain fully the choices that millions of Britons made in June of 2016 (Becker, Fetzer & Novy, 2016).

The second point to take from Holscher and Howard-Jones is that “Brexit is a symptom of a deeper malaise within Western society, where the hegemony of the neoliberal agenda has polarised societies confronted by democratic choices at the more extreme boundaries of political and economic ideology” (2018, p. 9). It is this alleged fact that accounts for the authors’ claim that Western societies confront the uncomfortable dilemma of choosing between more neoliberalism, and the ever-deepening inequality that it guarantees, or left-wing socialism. However, this is a false dilemma. Even setting aside the fact that no good case is made in their article against left-wing socialism, there is a third option—a return to what Harvey calls “embedded liberalism” (2005). This is the sort of political economy that was present in both the UK and the US in the decades immediately following the end of World War II. It combined free-market economic principles with strong social protections in the form of welfare protections, organised labour, and government regulation of industry and finance. Holscher and Howard-Jones completely overlook this option, and it is enough to defeat their entire line of argument concerning the bleakness of future options after Brexit. They might object that there is no way to go back to embedded liberalism. The thought might be that we can have a free-market economy, in which case we surrender neoliberalism, or a planned economy, in which case we surrender to socialism. But this claim is question-begging—it assumes the absence of the possibility of precisely the kind of political economy that Harvey calls “embedded liberalism”.

Alternative Explanations for Brexit

No adequate explanation for the results of the Brexit referendum could possibly ignore the role of anxiety over immigration. However, the other part of the explanation offered here, the appeal to neoliberalism and its toxic economic effects, is not universally accepted. This section will examine some of the alternative explanations that make no mention of neoliberalism, either direct or indirect.

Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017) contains a valuable discussion of the competing explanations for Brexit that is reasonably comprehensive. These authors also provide valuable data concerning the voting demographics that will be considered as well. At the beginning of their discussion of the Brexit result, Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley mention a number of possible factors: instrumental concerns about the benefits of UK membership between outweighed by the drawbacks of this membership; perceived negative economic effects of remaining in the EU; national identity and anxiety over “perceived threats to the native in-group, from immigration and the free movement of EU nationals”; general perceptions of risk; and the roles of leaders such as David Cameron, Boris Johnson, and Nigel Farage (2017, p. 146). These authors analyse these possible factors for explaining the Brexit vote using an extensive database of survey responses collected in the months following the referendum. They point to earlier research that established, prior to consideration of Brexit, a number of factors that seemed important to the British people. Reflection on these factors provides a kind of baseline against which to plot the concerns that emerged during and after the Brexit referendum. The factors are: (a) cost-benefit calculations; (b) feelings of attachment to the wider community; and (c) cues from political leaders—all of which have been shown to be operative in decisions made in referenda held in the decades and years prior to the Brexit vote (2017, p. 147).

We can comment on these factors briefly before moving on. As to (a), there is no doubt but that all those who voted in the referendum were influenced by cost-benefit analyses, of

some form or other, concerning the British membership in the EU. So with this factor it is not a question of whether it played a role, but only how significant that role was and how it affected voters' decision. Regarding (b), it is unclear to what extent feelings of attachment to community played a role in shaping attitudes toward Brexit. It does seem likely, however, that concern over immigration was fuelled, at least in part, by a concern that changes in the wider community that might result from unrestricted immigration could negatively impact conceptions of what it means to be British, what it means to live in a certain neighbourhood, and so forth. Finally, what do we make of (c): the idea that cues from political leaders may have influenced voting behaviour concerning Brexit? This factor too seems assured to have played a role, though there are many questions that can be asked from a less abstract point of view. It is notable, in particular, that one of the primary concerns of this paper—the argument that the effects of neoliberalism played a role in causing the Brexit decision, while actual commitment to neoliberal principles likely affected primarily the decisions of policy makers rather than ordinary voters—turns, in part, on how influential political leaders were in the decision on the referendum. Roughly speaking, if the impact of political leaders who were committed to neoliberalism was high, then that is a reason to doubt the thesis of the present paper; while, if the impact in question was low, then neoliberalism could only have impacted the election in roughly the way described here (Fetzer, 2019).

As Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley point out, as much as 75% of the British constituencies held by the Conservative Party voted for Brexit (2017, p. 150). This is in many ways unsurprising. The Conservative Party has long taken a sterner line on immigration than Labour, or some of the other parties, such as the Social Democrats. But we will not be in a position to evaluate the significance of this statistic fully until we have developed our position on how the Brexit vote is to be explained.

We know that turnout was very high for the referendum, estimated at 72.3% of all eligible voters. The voting results differed across Britain. Northern Ireland and Scotland produced Remain majorities of 44.2% and 38%, respectively. Wales, England, and the UK as a whole had Leave majorities of 52.5%, 53.4%, and 51.9%, respectively (Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017, p. 151). These authors combine census data with information from the 2015 general election in the UK to get an accurate picture of the relevant constituencies. “Opinion polls conducted before the referendum portrayed Leave voters as older, less well-educated and white people who identified themselves as being English and were often working in manual occupations” (2017, p. 151). This assertion fits the picture of Brexit voters that was sketched earlier. But it also adds something else. If the typical Leave voter worked in manual occupations, then it very likely that he or she has low wages that have been stagnant for some time. If this is correct then it provides some measure of support for the view that neoliberal economic policies contributed to the Brexit vote, and for two more specific reasons. First, as we have repeatedly noted neoliberalism has ensured that wealth and wages for the non-wealthy do not rise over time, when adjusted for inflation. All of the economic growth, for the most part, benefits only the wealthy and transnational corporations. Second, there were good low- and semi-skilled jobs, in both Britain and the US, prior to the loosening of capital controls and other policy shifts that allowed manufacturers to relocate their factories in China, Vietnam, or other foreign countries that have little or no organised labour, few health and environmental regulations, and people who have no choice but to work for sweatshop wages. The so-called “post-industrial” nations of the West are now largely in a situation in which nearly all well-paying low- and semi-skilled jobs have been taken out of the country. Even for those who have remained, however, the onslaught against organised labour has ensured that wages remain low (and benefits, when they are provided at all, tend to be much less valuable than in the past). In any case, the point for now is that it is not surprising that people who work in low-wage jobs

tended to vote Leave rather than Remain. This is precisely what one would expect if the thesis of the present paper is correct: if, that is, neoliberal economic policies have created widespread economic distress and disenfranchisement that people want desperately to escape; and so in voting to leave the EU they may have been hopeful for positive change, or simply making a “protest vote” to register their deep discontent (Holscher & Howard-Jones, 2018; Fetzer, 2019).

Another fact about the Leave voters in question, identified by Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley, is that “although not active politically, many of them were well integrated into their communities in the sense of being long-time residents and home owners” (2017, p. 151). Leave voters were also concentrated in rural areas, though there were some exceptions. Only Scotland produced fewer Leave votes per capita than London, which latter had only about a 22% Leave minority. These authors also provide very helpful and more specific demographic data concerning the referendum. Leave voting was highest in voters aged 46 years of age and older; in white British people, as opposed to minorities; and there is an inverse proportion Leave voting with “social grade”. What this means is that Leave voters were disproportionately poor and worked in only semi- or unskilled jobs (2017, p. 155).

These facts seem to support the hypothesis that Brexit occurred because of a combination of anxiety about immigration and the economic devastation that decades of neoliberal economic policies have had on much of the British population. For we know that there are also statistically significant correlations between concern about immigration and social grade. That is to say, those from a lower social grade are more likely than others to have concerns about immigration (as well as more likely to hold racist views in general). The same can be said of age and tendencies toward anxiety about immigration. This hypothesis also arguably helps to explain why ethnic minorities were much less likely to vote Leave than British whites; for they are clearly less likely to oppose immigration and migration from other EU nations.

Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley also provide data from questionnaires concerning perceived costs of leaving the EU and perceived costs of remaining in it. The focus here will be on the former set of questions. A majority of those surveyed said that they did not think that leaving the EU would affect their personal finances, for example (2017, p. 156). While a majority did express concerns about immigration, fully 46% of those studied said that they thought leaving the EU would not affect the situation vis-à-vis immigration in Britain. This is initially puzzling, but it is probably due to a common tendency to view immigration as involving people from non-EU states, such as Middle Eastern states, rather than from EU nations like Greece. Interestingly, 63% of those surveyed stated that they did not believe that leaving the EU would make any difference with respect to the dangers of terrorism. Recall that even the most radical Leavers had difficulty constructing arguments according to which immigration or migration from existing EU states would result in increased acts of terror. The best they could do was to predict that if Turkey joined the EU in the future it might produce immigrants more likely to engage in terrorism. Finally, a plurality of those surveyed (39%) said that they thought the economy would be worse off if Brexit occurred, compared to 37% who thought it would make no difference, and only 24% who thought Britain would be better off economically if it left the EU (2017, p. 156).

The conclusions that Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley draw about what factors most directly led to Brexit are intriguing and vary in some cases quite substantially from the explanation offered here. First, they conclude that cost-benefit calculations of two sorts—economic influence and immigration/terrorism—were very significant:

Respondents who were optimistic about the economy and Britain's role in the world if the country were to exit the EU were much more likely to vote Leave. Similarly, those who believed that Britain would be better able to control immigration and counter-terrorist threats if it were not part of the EU were more likely to vote leave. As also

expected, and unsurprisingly, perceptions of risks associated with leaving the EU have a highly significant impact on referendum voting. (2017, p. 161)

These conjectures are not all clearly compatible with the explanation for Brexit offered here, and so it will be necessary to discuss them at least briefly. First of all, there is no conflict with the authors' contention that those who thought that the economy and Britain's role in the world would be improved if they left the EU were more likely to vote Leave. Indeed, this is nearly trivial. It does not amount to much more than saying that those who thought that Brexit would be good for Britain tended to vote Leave. Second, it is not a problem for the analysis presented here that Britons who believed that leaving the EU would be a good way to control immigration and counter terrorist threats tended to vote Leave. Again, this is nearly trivial; the difference between this conjecture and the first one is that since everyone is at least minimally concerned with the economy and Britain's role in the world, it is not informative to be told that people voted Leave when they thought it was good for Britain and the economy. By contrast, not everyone is concerned about immigration, or overly concerned about terrorism. So it is not quite vacuous to be told that those who believed that these issues would be improved if Brexit occurred tended to vote leave. Finally, the point about perceptions of risk being significant in interesting and likely important; but it does not bear negatively with respect to the explanation offered here. Probably no thoughtful voter, irrespective of which side of Brexit he or she was on, realised that leaving the EU was a risk. (Though subsequent events have arguably shown that virtually no one understood just how complicated and difficult it would be to negotiate and put into place a soft Brexit.)

There are five final points to consider regarding the discussion of the reasons for Brexit in Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017). First, they find that "national identity measures are not statistically significant, with the sole exception of Scottish identifiers, who were less likely to vote to leave than were those who identified themselves as British" (2017, p. 161).

Presumably the authors mean to say that is that Scottish identifiers were less likely to be Leavers than voters who identified themselves primarily as British, since Scotland remains a part of Great Britain, strictly speaking. Moreover, Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley claim that socio-demographic characteristics “had no effects apart from a very modest tendency for individuals in higher socio-economic grades to vote for remain” (2017, p. 161). Modest or not, the tendency of Britons in higher socio-economic grades to opt for Remain tends to confirm the explanation suggested in the present paper. Obviously, if economic distress and disenfranchisement are among the causes of the Brexit vote, then we would expect those who are not stressed or disenfranchised economically not to vote for Leave, other things equal.

Second, Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley argue that the fear of being left behind economically did not have a statistically significant effect on how people voted in the Brexit referendum. They write that this “is largely because the other measures capture this sense of being left behind, which is at root an indicator of the costs and benefits of continued EU membership” (2017, p. 163). This claim is potentially problematic. It is not immediately clear what the authors mean in claiming that other measures “capture” this sense of being left behind. For one thing, it is obviously not impossible for a British person to feel the danger of being left behind in more than one sense; perhaps both economically and in the sense that he or she feels that Britain has lost its once unique and powerful place in the world, and that continued EU membership merely exacerbates this deflated sense of diminishing relevance and hegemony in the world. For another, survey data are not precise; they typically do not measure at a refined enough resolution to allow us to determine that, or whether, there is more than one causally isolated variable involved in the provision of a specific response.

The third final point to consider from the discussion in Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017) is that the aforementioned role of political elites is perhaps larger than one would expect. Prime Ministers David Cameron and Theresa May were dismissed, at least in large part, because

of the ways in which they were perceived in handling the “Brexit crisis”. However, other politicians have fared much better in this respect. In particular, these authors single out Boris Johnson as having exerted an especially significant influence on the Brexit referendum. This claim is prescient given the fact, of which the authors could have no knowledge, that Johnson has since been elected Prime Minister. In any case, their argument concerning Johnson’s influence is as follows:

Of the country’s political leaders, it is the effects associated with Boris Johnson, the high-profile, outspoken former mayor of London, that are particularly interesting. Unlike Nigel Farage, Johnson had supported the country’s EU membership for many years and his conversion to the Brexit cause was a surprise to some of his colleagues, not least Cameron. Johnson announced his decision immediately after Cameron had announced the date of the referendum and he was quickly designated as the unofficial leader of the Leave forces. (2017, p. 171)

While this does demonstrate that, as the authors note, Johnson had tremendous media presence and potential influence after his defection to the anti-EU side of the debate, it does not yet show that he had any special influence over the referendum itself. Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley point out that, according to their surveys and related research, feelings about Johnson had a “strong and significant” effect on the forces that affected the Leave vote (2017, p. 171). This judgement, if it is correct, does lend some modicum of support to the “direct model” of neoliberalism’s effect on the Brexit vote. For Johnson does hold some decidedly neoliberal views, as the authors point out (2017, pp. 171-2).

Fourth, Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley note that there is evidence that some who voted for Leave have changed their minds in the chaos that has followed the years since the referendum (2017, p. 211). And, indeed, one cannot but wonder, if one is following the thousands of stories that have been written about Brexit in the world’s various media, many of

the Leavers feel that they made a critical error; and whether the country would not welcome a second chance to make a determination on whether to leave the EU. Since the events subsequent to the referendum are not the subject of this paper, it is necessary to emphasise that the interest of this question is, in the present context, simply that it may shed additional light on why those who voted for Leave voted as they did. If many of these voters have now changed their minds, that would tell us something about their motives; for they would not have changed their minds on many of the key factors involved in the decision, such as the importance of immigration issues.

Finally, and fifth, Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley argue that the lack of popular support for a second referendum on Brexit is attributable, at least in large part, to the fact that the economy did not in fact collapse, or even exhibit serious signs of distress, following the 2016 referendum (2017, p. 215). This may be quite correct, but it would seem to impute a relative lack of intellectual sophistication on the part of members of the British electorate. For the fact is that we do not know, and will not know until the extrication of the UK from the EU is complete, what the economic effects will be. So the authors' contention, which is designed to bolster their case to the effect that the Brexit decision was probably the correct one, does not survive serious scrutiny.

Brexit and the Rise of the Far Right in Europe

The final two substantive sections of the paper will argue a point made at the outset—that the causes of Brexit were fundamentally similar to the causes of two broadly contemporaneous and equally momentous events: the rise of far-right political parties in Europe, on one hand, and the election of the openly racist current president of the US, on the other. The similarity of the causal structures underlying these three events is, of course, compatible with the existence of differences among them. The chief differences, it will be argued, are between the situations with respect to immigration in the US, and immigration in Britain and the rest of Europe.

There has been, in recent years and decades, a prominent resurgence of far-right political leaders and parties in Europe, such as those in France, Germany, Greece, and Austria. While there are important differences amongst the four cases, they share in common racist and xenophobic viewpoints and perspectives that tend to be crystallised in remarks and policies concerning immigration. In this sense there is a clear and significant parallel between the concerns that led to Brexit and the reasons for the rise of far-right political parties in Europe (we speak here of Britain as if it is separate from Europe, though nothing turns on this; we could equally well speak of the rise of Boris Johnson, leading member of the British Conservative party, as simply a special case of the rise of far-right politicians and parties in Europe). Far-right politicians and their supporters do not, of course, commonly identify with the label “racist” or “xenophobic”. Instead they tend to appeal to nationalism, populism, and to the desire to preserve certain ways of life and cultures. But the reality is that nationalism is an intrinsically racist ideology, however fervently its supporters may attempt to deny this. There is a simple proof of this: nationalism is precisely the belief that members of certain nations, or of proper subsets of the memberships of certain nations, are in some way superior to members of other nations, or other subsets within other nations. But in reality there are no differences in value

between the members of different nations. So any claim to the contrary is simply a racist conceit.

The rise of the far right in Europe has the same fundamental causes as does the Brexit referendum. Economic distress and disenfranchisement of the sort caused by neoliberal economic practices and policies have been felt across Europe, especially since the 2008 economic recession. Some European nations, most prominently Greece, have been effectively crippled by the banking crises caused by the end of regulation that is so characteristic of neoliberalism (Ignazi, 2003). The same fundamental point is made by Ghosh (2011), who argues that the 2008 recession combined with native tendencies toward racism to provide a pronounced boost to the ideologies of far-left politicians and political parties in Europe. Neoliberalism is the ultimate cause of these developments, and has led consistently to political, social, and cultural tensions of the sort that radical far-right political parties thrive on (Ghosh 2011, p. 184). Finally, Davidson and Saull (2016) argue that neoliberalism has so deeply pervaded contemporary discourse and thought in political economy that it now passes for common sense. It is this feature of the hegemony of neoliberalism that explains something otherwise completely inexplicable—the fact that a nation such as Greece, which has been devastated economically as a result of neoliberal economic policies, should be required to embrace another neoliberal ideology, that of austerity, to solve the problem created by neoliberalism (Davidson and Saull 2016, pp. 2-3).

In summary, the rise of the far right in Europe shares many commonalities with the conditions and attitudes that led to the Brexit vote. In each case the combination of economic stress and disenfranchisement with anxiety over the consequence of relatively unrestricted immigration policies impelled voters to embrace radical far-right solutions to these problems. The chief difference in the two cases is that Britain, unlike many other European nations, does not have a history of successful far-right political parties. If it did have such a history, then we

might plausibly expect the success of parties like the British National Party or Britain first, and other parties like it on the fringe of the far right.

Brexit and the Rise of the Far Right in the United States

The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016 is an event that shares a number of significant characteristics with the other two phenomena examined here: the Brexit vote and the rise of the far right in Europe. Despite this, the US election is quite different in certain respects than the other two events in question. The discussion of this section will begin with commonalities and end with brief discussion of the important differences.

Virtually no one, even well into the election, expected Trump to defeat his opponent Hillary Clinton. Many analyses place at least a substantial portion of the blame on Clinton herself, and the strategies that she employed in the later stages of the election. Clinton herself blames her defeat on the unexpected FBI investigation concerning allegedly improperly directed emails (Ball, 2016). This may be a small part of the actual reason for the election loss, but the reality is that Clinton woefully misjudged her audience on several speaking occasions just weeks or days prior to the election. She repeatedly asked whether her audiences were not better off than they had been 8 years previously, when Barack Obama first took office. This question was pertinent since Clinton was effectively promises another four (or eight) years of the same policies her predecessor had delivered (though it must be said, in fairness, that Obama was thwarted at nearly every turn by a Republican controlled Congress). The grave error that Clinton made was conflating her donor base (which was certainly better off than it had been after eight additional years of neoliberal economic policies enriching them at the expense of everyone else in the county), with the electorate (which was decidedly worse off after another eight years of neoliberalism) (Ball, 2016).

Additional errors of the Clinton campaign included effectively gifting Trump the white working-class vote in many parts of the American Midwest; failing to appeal effectively to poor and nearly middle-class white voters; failing to appeal effectively to the disenfranchised minority and left-leaning whites that had so strongly backed Obama; failing to distance herself

from the perception of Obama's having bailed out the banking class to the economic detriment of other Americans; and finally a complaisance or even arrogance, which was perhaps understandable, given that her opponent appeared to be definitely unelectable. He seemed unelectable not only because of his ignorance, open racism, and being caught on tape boasting about several sexual assaults on women. Clinton, in common with most other people, simply did not believe that the American people would elect such a person (Ball, 2016).

But not all the blame for Trump's victory can be laid at Clinton's doorstep, of course. There are several reasons that he won that are independent of Clinton's errors. And each of them is instructive concerning the relations between the Trump victory, on one hand, and the rise of the far right in Europe, including Brexit and the recent election of Trump as the UK's Prime Minister, on the other. First, Trump's anti-immigrant and racist message unfortunately resonated with millions of white Americans. Perhaps the one key factor for understanding the bewildering 2016 US presidential election is that hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of those who had voted for Obama had to switch their votes to Trump, and to the Republican party, for Trump to win. It is not at all a natural shift to move from a black candidate to an openly racist white candidate. But it happened. Moreover, we should not underestimate the backlash that has always followed progress in the civil rights movement in the US. In the case of the 2016 presidential election, there was a strong racist backlash against eight years of an African American president that many whites were as bewildered about having been elected as others would later be about Trump's own victory. Finally, Trump was not afraid of making openly racist comments, in a wide variety of contexts. Certainly, many Republican candidates and presidents had in the past expressed racist messages using coded language. But Trump eschewed subtlety, and this won him the votes of millions upon millions of white voters, albeit mostly uneducated and racist voters (Zurcher, 2016).

We have seen thus far that Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election was the product mostly of the same forces that created Brexit and have led to the rise of far-right politicians and political parties in the rest of Europe. He relied upon Americans' sense of economic disenfranchisement, and he relied heavily upon an anxiety about immigration that owed a great deal to naked racism and xenophobia. Yet there are several differences between the Trump election and these other phenomena. Two will be highlighted here. First, few if any European politicians are as blatantly and openly racist as Trump is. It does not matter for present purposes whether this is the result of clever calculation on Trump's part, or if he is simply, as he certainly appears to be, an arrogant and ignorant buffoon. The fact is that he gets away with it. Indeed, Trump's base in the electorate, which encompasses around one-third of American voters, simply do not care what he says or does. If we have learned anything in the last three years, it is that the support of Trump's base is completely unconditional. Europe's leaders cannot afford to be so complacent. They are forced to practise what is known as "deniable racism"—racism that is not so blatant that it cannot be effectively explained away (Younge, 2018). Trump, by contrast, is celebrated in the US precisely because he is openly racist (Beauchamp, 2018).

The second difference between Trump's rise, on one hand, and the rise of the European far right and Brexit, on the other, is that the alleged US immigration crisis is simply mythical. There is no more demand now than there has been in recent years for passage across the US southern border on the part of inhabitants of Mexico and Central America. And there is certainly no truth to the claims of the current US president, among others, to the effect that immigration from the south is raising US crime rates and harming the economy. The so-called "immigration crisis" in the US is entirely manufactured for political purposes. By contrast, there is a genuine immigration crisis in Britain and other parts of Europe. Or at least, there is a potential crisis given the effects of civil wars such as in Syria, economically devastated EU members such as

Greece, and countless other millions of people who will be displaced in the future by the effects of climate change. Moreover, Britain and other European nations are geographically close to many of the centres of migration and immigration; unlike the US, which has to worry only about immigration from its southern border, which is in any case tightly controlled and not subject to the whim of external bodies, as Britain is to the EU's verdicts on the appropriateness of movements of residents and citizens of its member states (Mandelbaum, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has offered an explanation for the occurrence of Brexit and defended it against competing explanations. The introduction outlined the issues involved, including the rough agendas of both the Leave and the Remain campaigns that were mounted in the year or so in between the commencement of public debate over Brexit and the referendum itself. The Leave campaign emphasised issues pertaining to immigration, including the economic costs of remaining in the EU that are relevant to immigration. The Remain campaign focused resolutely on economic issues from the beginning, especially alleged economic problems and uncertainties that would result from Britain leaving the EU. The thesis of the paper was advanced at this point, according to which the Brexit vote resulted from a combination of economic insecurity—created nearly exclusively by neoliberal economic policies—and anxiety about immigration. Concerns about immigration were a conglomeration of anxieties about the economic effects of continued unchecked immigration, particularly from EU and prospective EU nations, and the effects of this on social welfare services such as the National Health Service. A complication, which is only fully addressed later in the paper, is that neoliberalism can be viewed as either a direct or an indirect cause of Brexit. It is direct if the voters, or those who sought to influence them, were themselves influenced by neoliberal economic ideology. It was indirect if the effect was only felt through the negative economic effects on the population of neoliberal economic policies—more particularly, the economic distress and disenfranchisement that has plagued millions of Britons as a result of decades of neoliberal economic policies. While the paper argues that the indirect effects were more prominent, it makes room for an element of direct influence as well; in particular an influence that was exerted on the referendum's result by popular British politicians such as Boris Johnson.

The paper turned next to examine briefly some of the alternative explanations for the Brexit vote. Issues confronted here included the history of Britain's relation to the EU, in

particular, and its much longer history of relations to Europe, in general. Also notable was the decline of the de facto two-party political system in Britain after 1975, which introduced a thitherto unfelt element of uncertainty and diversity into British politics. It is at least arguable that had the two-party system endured into the twenty-first century, Brexit would not have been so much as contemplated, much less achieved. A related influential development was the rise of the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) which stressed, in ways not previously given voice to, the importance of British independence and sovereignty. More detail is offered, finally, in this section concerning the relative priorities assigned by the Leave and Remain campaigns.

The next section examined in somewhat more detail the relationship between immigration and neoliberalism. This section expounded at greater length on the different ways that the Remain and Leave campaigns appealed to economic considerations to support their favoured responses to the referendum. A key finding first emphasised in this section is that age was a factor in the Brexit referendum. Contrary to some purported explanations for Britain's decision to extricate itself from the EU, the younger generation was not responsible for Brexit; to the contrary, older voters decided in much greater numbers to withdraw from the EU. A second point is the effects, or perceived effects, of globalisation on the Brexit vote. One might expect, if neoliberalism and its effects were the primary impetus for Brexit, that globalisation would have been operative in the decision to sever Britain's ties to the EU. However, this perspective overrates the negligible extent to which British voters were likely cognisant of neoliberalism and its deleterious effects on the average resident of the UK. Neoliberalism did not operate directly, in this fashion, but indirectly—in producing the economic misery that led so many to opt for a decision that was, to say the least, radical and not-quite-well-thought-out. On the other hand, it would be difficult to blame the British people for attempting, by whatever

means necessary, to improve their lot in the face of decades of neoliberal economic policies first formally instituted by Thatcher in the early 1980s.

A good example of an alternative explanation for Brexit is the appeal to so-called “Euroscepticism” on the part of authors such as Carl, Dennison and Evans (2019). This position combines two explanatory elements, one of which is quite convincing and the other of which is unsupported and even naïve. The former is the view that many British people feel that their nation, of which they are justly proud, has since the beginning of the twentieth-century, and increasingly since the end of World War II, receded into mediocrity—after decades or even centuries of being the world’s leading and largest power. This lesson was particularly difficult to learn and absorb given that came at the hands of the US, which not only displaced the UK as the world’s leading superpower, but was reduced to that status by the unprecedented refusal on the part of the US to forgive debts incurred during the two World Wars, and even to insist upon, not only their full repayment, but their full repayment with interest. In this way the US, in a way that is not at all well-appreciated in most popular history texts, indirectly caused the Second World War.

Another explanation for Brexit, which does comport well with the explanation offered in these pages, is that the Brexit vote was, at least for many Britons, a proxy vote that was a way to express their deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. In effect, as has been argued above, for many a vote for Brexit was a “protest vote”—a way to signal that, whatever the outcome of the referendum, the British people were very tired indeed of being neglected and indeed exploited by wealthy elites and their public policy messengers. As the final portions of the paper attempt to bring out, something very similar can be said of those who have supported the rise of far-right politicians and political parties in the rest of Europe, on one hand, and of the benighted souls who saw fit to vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election, on the other.

A central part of the paper expounded in more detail on what neoliberalism is, and how it has worldwide produced conditions that are favourable for the advancement of far-right political parties. One aspect of this problem that is not sufficiently discussed in the paper is that wealthy countries depend upon certain governmental structures in the service countries that they exploit. There is, after all, a reason why the US has continually subverted democracy in the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean—the reason is that democracy is not a political structure that is hospitable for US business interests. It is much easier to control and bribe autocrats and dictators, or even military juntas. The bottom line is that neoliberal ideology can succeed only where leaders and US allies can control a nation's political elites and other decision makers. While the US has been mentioned specifically here, this is only because it offers the clearest case of the *explananda* in question. Something similar holds for any wealthy and colonialist country, such as the UK

In the end, the central thesis that has been defended here is that Brexit, along with the rise of far-right political parties in Europe and the US, has been produced by a combination of economic insecurity and disenfranchisement, on one hand, and concern about immigration that is fuelled by racism and xenophobia, on the other. Only by understanding why Brexit occurred can we hope to control its future effects for the good of the world as a whole.

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