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The Myth and Reality of Brexit City: Sunderland and the 2016 Referendum

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the stereotyped media image of Sunderland as 'Brexit City', the epitome of the crisis in working-class voting. By contrast, local voting patterns suggests that the city was typical of Labour heartlands. It is argued that factors such as education and class may have been more important, factors that were reflected nationally as well as locally in the North East. More broadly, the crisis of English, white, identity in the former industrial heartlands is conceptually and historically explored to place Sunderland in its unique local context.

KEY WORDS

Brexit; Labour voters and the EU; de-industrialisation; white identity; English nationalism.

Introduction

The result of the UK 2016 Referendum on European Union membership, a narrow victory for the 'Leave' campaign or Brexit, came as a shock to most media commentators. To those who had made a study of the changing sense of identity and political loyalties of many working-class voters, the result fitted a pattern going back several decades. An intersection of several processes has been identified in recent work, such as de-industrialisation, loss of secure well-paid work, a sense of isolation from metropolitan cultural trends, a heightened anxiety about immigration, and, most recently, the growth of a specifically English national identity. These have all been subject to critical scrutiny and debate among social scientists. The purpose here is to apply some of these insights to the situation in Sunderland, and the approach resembles what has been called the 'third wave' of whiteness studies, attempting to scrutinise 'localised whiteness as it intersects with class, nation and gender' (Garner, 2009: 789). The strength of local feelings about recent social change, however, requires more emphasis on an historical exploration of the locality over the last two generations.

Media Impressions

In the early hours of 24 June 2016, a few minutes after it was reported that Newcastle upon Tyne had voted 'Remain' by a narrow margin, the news came in that Sunderland, a safe Labour city, had voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union. The shock ran through the TV commentators prepared for a long night. This result is still seen as the most significant result during a fraught night for Labour after the Referendum. The vote was 61:39 for leaving, on a 65% turnout. From the 134,400 votes cast, Leave received 82,394 and Remain polled 51,930. (Referendum Results, 2016). Sunderland established itself as Brexit city. What I hope to show here is that, while Sunderland was the first, it was by no means the worst, when it comes to 'traditional' labour voters going for Brexit.

The Referendum result, which Sunderland's votes epitomised, was commonly characterised as a major crisis for the Labour Party's relationship with its core supporters, the traditional, largely white, working class. This was despite the fact that it led immediately to the downfall of Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron: yet attention was

diverted towards analysis of Labour's 'crisis'. 'Labour is facing an extraordinary meltdown in its traditional heartlands as working-class areas voted 'Leave' in their droves' said the *Daily Mirror* the day after, next to a large picture of the 'Leave' campaigners celebrating in Sunderland (Glaze and Blanchard, 2016). The party's leadership had allegedly lost touch with popular anxieties about immigration and the European Union, and the official policy of qualified, rather unenthusiastic, support for 'Remain' was seen by many commentators as an indication of that general crisis. The *New York Times* went further, claiming that the 'Pro-Brexit City' was 'glad to poke the establishment in the eye', and the story was accompanied by somewhat stereotyped photographs of flag-strewn terraced houses in Washington, a 'run-down neighbourhood close to the Nissan plant'. Local people resented both London *and* Brussels, the reporter claimed, and felt excluded from the new developments paid for by the European Union such as the new Aquatic Centre and the 'sleek modern' university, both of which seemed impossibly expensive (De Freytas-Tamurajune, 2016). This report led the *Sunderland Echo* to encourage people to respond vigorously to the misrepresentation of the city.

Facts and Figures

Contrary to the media interpretations, the 2016 votes for 'Leave' in Sunderland, 82,394, may have been largely made up of supporters of traditional Eurosceptic parties. If all those who voted Conservative and UKIP in 2015 voted 'out', then at least 47,000 in the Referendum could have been Tory and UKIP voters, and were certainly unlikely to have been Labour. The proportion of voters for UKIP in the election exceeded that of the Conservatives, ranging from 10.6% (Washington and West Sunderland) to 13.4% (Sunderland Central) (See Table 1). If the UKIP supporters can confidently be characterised as 'Brexit' voters, the Conservatives are harder to interpret. It seems likely that the local Conservatives are different from the middle-class 'remainers' of the more affluent South. Between the two, therefore, these could account for 58% of the 'Brexiters'.

There are other factors, too, unique to Referendum: the most significant and little noticed feature was the increased turnout of voters in many areas, particularly when compared with the 2015 general election (See

Table 1). Some districts also experienced an increase in registered voters in the months before the Referendum, though this was not the case in Sunderland, where the electorate, at just over 200,000, seems to have been stable, declining slightly in fact compared with recent years. The turnout in the Referendum, however was, at 65%, far more than the 55-57% the three constituencies¹ had shown in the parliamentary elections of the previous year (see Table 1). The issue of membership of the European Union seems to have galvanised a much larger proportion of voters to take part than had the more mundane affair of parliamentary elections: nationally there was about a 72% turnout. These extra voters seem more likely to have been recently-mobilised Brexiters than suddenly-alarmed remainers. It therefore seems probable, though it is difficult to prove, that part of the Brexit vote came from 'traditional' **non**-voters, though whether they were former voters for Labour or any other party much earlier in their careers is impossible to say. If these all voted 'out', then another 8-10% of the Sunderland voters who opted for 'Brexit' – perhaps between 16,000 and 20,000 – came from this category of the previously inactive.

Table 1: Voting Patterns by Constituency in 2015 General Election

	Washington And West Sunderland	Sunderland Central	Houghton Le Spring And Sunderland South
TORY	7,033	7,997	7,105
UKIP	7,321	9,780	8,280
Joint total =	14,354	17,777	15,385
Labour Vote =	20,1408	20,959	212,218
Liberal Democrats	993	1105	791
Green Party	1091	1706	1095

Overall total Conservative and UKIP = **47516** Labour = 62,585

On this calculation, therefore, with all the caveats and necessary expressions of caution, we can say that of the 82,000 or more who voted 'Brexit', between 63,000 and 67,000 were probably not Labour voters. That, however, still leaves a substantial minority who almost certainly were. At least 16,000 'leave' voters must have been Labour – which is

¹ Washington and West Sunderland, Sunderland Central, and Houghton-le-Spring and Sunderland South.

more than a quarter of the 2015 Labour voters, and could have been closer to a third of the 62,000 or so who had voted for Labour candidates in 2015. This is not far off the national average: estimates vary, but it was calculated that about two thirds of Labour voters supported 'remain', compared with more than 70% of Liberal Democrats, the most enthusiastic pro-EU party in England. The two initial surveys, by the Ashcroft organisation suggested 63% of Labour voters chose 'remain', while YouGov indicated 65%(see Polling Surveys, 2017). Nationally, only 42% of Conservative voters did so – a clear measure of David Cameron's failure to persuade his own party. That contrast, which might perhaps surprise many, is a measure of Jeremy Corbyn's *success* in 2016. On that basis, Sunderland should have seen 20,000 Labour vote for 'out' - which is in line with the estimated calculations produced in this paper. Allowing for margins of error, it is unlikely that Sunderland was unusual in any significant way, or that it deviated very much from the national picture of Labour voting. 'Sunderland about average', however, would scarcely have made a startling headline (Curtice, 2016a and 2016b).

Education and Cosmopolitanism

This does not necessarily mean that Sunderland lacks distinctive characteristics which may have shaped the voting pattern in the Referendum. The city has had an unusual social and political history in several ways that may have been significant. Cosmopolitanism, educational level, and local community diversity all seem to have been key factors in influencing voting patterns in 2016. Sunderland has a small proportion of graduates in its population, and is relatively white – in fact, with one of the smallest proportion of British ethnic minorities and recently-arrived migrants anywhere in the North. If we look at the proportion of white, British-born residents, then Sunderland, at 94.8% in the 2011 census, is as 'British' as Cheshire (in fact slightly more so than the eastern part of that county) (Census 2011). Newcastle, at 81.9%, and Middlesbrough at 86.1%, are far more diverse, with greater numbers of migrants both white, black and Asian, as well as many more *British-born* ethnic minorities. Hartlepool, one of the most passionately 'Brexit' places in the North East, is almost the most white British-born of all, at 96.6%, above the regional average. Yet the most diverse city, Newcastle, voted 'remain', while Teesside, with very similar levels of diversity, voted 'Brexit' (see Census, 2011). Sunderland, in fact, has had a long history of immigration going back to the nineteenth century, something that was

until recently reflected in the range of religious denominations in the city. German Lutherans were once common, and Sunderland still has one of the largest Mormon churches in the North (Religious Worship, 1853: cclxix). The 100-year old Jewish community, originally from the Baltic, has dispersed recently, and the growing Muslim community has developed only over the last thirty years. There may be a cosmopolitan element in the population, particularly with the development of the university's international links, but it is probably very limited compared with that in other diverse urban areas such as London.

Another factor in the general pattern of voting, was age and levels of education. Richmond upon Thames, where about half of adults have higher education experience, was always going to vote *for* the EU (*Guardian*, 2016; *Evening Standard*, 2016). Sunderland has its successful young people, now progressing in larger numbers than ever before to higher education institutions. Despite this, the proportion of people with first-level university qualifications or above is less than a fifth (18%): by contrast, Newcastle's, at 27%, is precisely the average for England and Wales (2011 Census). Sunderland's older residents, though, while proud of their youngsters, have had little experience of post-18 education, even if many are highly skilled in the once-traditional industrial trades. In several of the poorest districts the proportion with any higher education (university level or equivalent) experience is below a tenth. It is possible to see a widespread generational and educational gulf both in Sunderland and elsewhere (Curtice, 2016a and b). Instead of seeing the whole population as post-industrial 'left-behinds', it has to be recognised that the veterans of now-vanished industries *in particular areas* voted in ways that were more nostalgic and resentful than the younger voters whose educational prospects have decisively improved in the twenty-first century. This is also the *national* picture: Brexit was overwhelmingly supported by those aged 65 or more. This is not to say that Sunderland's younger generation have chances equal to those of the South: as the Social Mobility Commission reports have demonstrated, the North, and particularly the North-East, has not generated the numbers of professional-level graduate job opportunities that are seen in the South, notably in London and the South-East. The younger generation, too, face regional disappointments (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). One consequence of the failure to develop the professional salaried employment sector, common to a number of northern cities, is that wage

inequalities are comparatively low in Sunderland – it is a *more* egalitarian city than most (Lee et al., 2016: 1718).

One factor in the voting pattern of young people, generally neglected by commentators, was gender: among those under 25, far more women voted for the EU (80%) than men (60%). Women were also slightly more favourable to EU memberships in other age groups, only falling below the men's level of support among the oldest group. This has attracted little attention, even in academic research, but it might be that much of the language of memory and resentment discussed below is largely male. The sociology of 'white' identity has also been rather vague on gender differences (Statista, 2016).

Sunderland, History and the Industrial Heritage

Sunderland is distinctive, however, in having had a longstanding pattern on rightwing voting, particularly in the inner city wards, shown in previous years by the strength of the British National Party which at times gained 15% of the votes cast in local elections (Teale, 2002-17; Saeed, 2007). The BNP seems to have been replaced in many people's affections by UKIP which, has less baggage as an extreme-right party, and its broader appeal is reflected in its votes which matched those of the Conservatives in Sunderland in 2015. This is not untypical of many parts of the North in general, as Kirsty Major pointed out in the *The Independent*, on 24 June 2016, the day after the Referendum. The North-South divide in the Referendum reflected some deep-rooted political loyalties in terms of the politics of immigration. There are also additional powerful elements of emotional loyalty to the past in Sunderland, particularly to the history of the armed forces, whose flags are sometimes flown from backgarden flagpoles. The Remembrance Day celebrations are reportedly among the largest outside London, and the sense of pride in the past merges with the memories of local contributions to national history such as through the coal and shipbuilding industries (BBC, 2011). It would be an exaggeration to regard Sunderland's Brexiters as fascists-lite: what the Referendum seems to have achieved is a broader coalition of a particular English, white working-class set of feelings and local pride behind 'Leave'.

Local Pride and Memory

Memories and 'traditions', both national and local, are rarely very ancient: ever since historians began to examine the 'invention of tradition', there has been academic scepticism and debate about the political, official, manipulation of memories (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Nevertheless, the sense of living among the physical remains and social consequences of a unique local history shapes identities in many places for many people. Yet, generally, what Patrick Wright called 'living in an old country' is not simple (Wright, 1985). In 2007 there were many efforts to address Britain's dominance of the slave trade, in the bicentenary of its abolition, but this was more than just commemoration: it necessarily involved acknowledgement of responsibility. The centenary of World War I provokes similar dilemmas, of recognising the courage and sacrifices certainly, but also of questioning the way they were required by the generals and commanders.

Economic change, the death and replacement of old industries, and the memories of their history, also pose these dilemmas. Memories and local pride centre on the loss of shipyards and mines rather than the re-invention of Sunderland and Washington as the place of one of Nissan's most productive car plants. History and 'memory' are *locally* constructed in areas that have been through both de-industrialisation and re-industrialisation. Sunderland's memories are entirely about men's work, and many academic studies of deindustrialisation have concentrated on male sectors such as coal, steel and railways, with a few exceptions such as Walkerdine and Jimenez: although even they took women in a former coal and steel area as their focus. Only Jane Wheelock, working in the North East, considered the changing domestic and personal implications of the simultaneous changes in men's and women's work (Strangleman et al., 2014; Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012; Wheelock, 1990). By contrast, in West Yorkshire and Lancashire, where the textile industry engaged women from the late eighteenth century onwards, the now-empty mills still dominating the landscape mark the end of skilled, industrial work for generations of women. More broadly, there is some evidence that deindustrialisation generally *reduces* the proportion of women in manufacturing, a form of 'defeminisation' that has attracted little attention (Tejani and Milberg, 2010). In different localities, therefore, what Walkerdine has called the 'affective landscapes', that is, the emotional meanings of places of work, are very different depending on the gender division of labour and involvement in industrial work. Men and women may attach different memories to buildings and places in their towns and regions (Walkerdine, 2016). What has been called, rather

brutally, 'smokestack nostalgia' for past industries, varies both by region and gender (Strangleman, 2013 and 2017).

The new forms of work have employed women on a large scale, unprecedented in the North East if not elsewhere in the North. By the early twenty-first century it was calculated that there were 50,000 jobs in the North East's call centres. Along with the retail sector, public services and growing financial services, many jobs for women, sometimes openly despised as such, were created (Tomaney, 2006:10). The numbers of jobs in services and finance doubled in the first decade of the twenty-first century. By 2009 reports were calling Sunderland's job creation a renaissance, even though the overall population had declined (Cooper, 2009:3-5). The 2011 census, however, suggests that, with 14,000 manufacturing jobs in Sunderland (about 12% of total employment), and rising numbers of those involved in construction, the city was still more classically industrial than elsewhere (Census, 2011; Singer, 2007).

The English Factor

The rise of a specifically *English* sense of nationalism was one of the features of the 2015 election: David Cameron had played the nationalist card with his fear-inducing assertion that if people did not vote for him, the (Labour) Scots would be coming, like the old Border Reivers - with Labour help - perhaps (Milne, 2015). Similarly, UKIP had most of its strongholds in England, though one surprise was the strength of the 'Brexit' vote in parts of de-industrialised South Wales. This sense of Englishness was almost certainly a factor in Sunderland's sense of resentment against Brussels - and in some ways, against London. The two are not incompatible: the sense of marginalisation produced general resentment, even if the result of the vote would actually strengthen London's power. Both the *New York Times* and, after a period of reflection six months after the vote, the *Guardian's* northern correspondent, came to a conclusion that anti-London sentiment played a major part in the way people voted (Helen Pidd, 2016; De Freytas-Tamurajune, 2016).

There is certainly some evidence of the rise of a strong feeling of 'Englishness' in the early twenty-first century, but this is largely a pattern among whites. In fact, there are distinctly different patterns of

identification when the British white majority are compared with members of ethnic minorities: While white people have increasingly placed their 'local' national identity first, particularly Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish identities, the ethnic minorities overwhelmingly identify as British. Moreover, this British identity *becomes stronger* in the second generation, despite a parallel sense of belonging to a group with a particular national and religious background. Dual identities are common among Black and ethnic minority groups, in other words. As one significant piece of research concluded,

Overall then we see that dual identities are the 'typical' acculturation pattern for the UK's ethnic minorities. Holding a strong British identity increases over generations as the tendency to have a strong minority identity reduces. We also see that those who appear to be most at risk of marginalization, in these terms of identity acculturation – with the greatest proportion maintaining neither strong minority nor strong majority identities, are the Caribbean group – a group which is recognised as being socially, geographically and in employment terms the most 'assimilated' . . . , but which may, in line with other findings, contain a section that feels alienated by a society that is still strongly stratified along racial and ethnic lines ' (Nandi and Platt, 2013: 34).

From this, we could conclude that one of our oldest ethnically distinct groups, African-Caribbeans, remain the most alienated from Britishness, particularly among the young. This has been reflected in repeated anti-police protests and the 2011 rioting. More generally, it seems that, while white people have felt increasingly as members of one of the constituent founding nations of Britain, young people in the ethnic minorities have developed a growing sense of Britishness.

The rise of '*Englishness*' was documented by one significant piece of research before the 2015 election and the Referendum. In 2011 and 2014 data produced by the The Future of England Survey (ironically, run by universities in Wales and Scotland) demonstrated a major shift in English identification. Whereas once, the English were equally likely to identify as British or English, by 2014 this had been transformed into an overwhelmingly English identity. This is a predominantly white reaction to the changes since the late twentieth century. The research highlighted a pattern of resentment against both the European Union *and* what was

seen as the favourable settlement of Scottish devolution: the researchers designated this as 'devo-anxiety'. While in 2011 there were signs that a demand for equal treatment for England had some support, by 2014 the resentment had hardened into a generalised opposition to Europe and Scotland: both of England's unions, the UK and the EU, were resented. 'Feeling English in England appears to harden attitudes towards England's two "others": Scotland, and its perceived advantages within the UK; and the EU' (Henderson et al., 2014: 15). In a prophetic prediction, the study, significantly called 'Taking England Seriously', warned of the political consequences for Labour and the Liberal Democrats of campaigns that played on English resentments (Henderson et al, 2014: 33-4; Curtice, 2016c). Garner has described the feelings brought together under a focus on immigration as less ones of class than a sense of loss of the traditional 'entitlement' to place in British society (Garner, 2010: 1-3).

Immigration and Social Change

It seems that a combination of strong feelings of local loss, of English identity, and political opposition to immigration led to English rejection of the EU outside London and a few other cities. The Brexit slogan 'Let's Take Back Control' clearly resonated in ways that echoed both the earlier anti-immigration politics directed against Commonwealth migrants *and* the longstanding sense of grievance concerning loss of sovereignty to Brussels. The result was that the politics of immigration, now directed largely against white, European migrants, dominated the Referendum campaign. A basic premise of this derived from a long-held belief among many rightwing commentators that immigration at high levels undermines both social solidarity and national identity: as Enoch Powell had remarked, 'it is all a matter of numbers', versions of which were echoed in the criticisms protesting not opposition to immigration as such, but to its supposedly unsustainable levels. 'The Leave majority does amount to a public vote of no confidence in how governments have handled immigration over the last decade': yet most voters interviewed agreed that the whole issue had become overheated in the campaigns (Katwala et al., 2016: 4 and 7).

There is a large academic literature debating the effects of immigration on the host society, focussing largely on whether a multicultural society can achieve social cohesion, and in effect, integration of minorities, without enforcing or encouraging levels of assimilation to core values (see Antonsich, 2015; Casey, 2016; Biggar, 2014; and Collier, 2013). The

politicisation of the issue makes any academic intervention almost impossible, but it is worth briefly summarising what is known. If the data discussed above suggest that Britain's ethnic minorities identify as British, and this is increasingly so with the second generation (with the exception of young Afro-Caribbeans), studies suggest that there is an equivalent and parallel acceptance of diversity among young whites. In general, surveys suggest that there is a strong sense of internationalism among many people, particularly the young in Britain (Cantle, 2015: 471-2). Among the young in the most diverse city in Britain, London, there has developed a strong sense of social cohesion and community. Clearly, social cohesion has not been undermined by cultural diversity where frequent contact with many different people has led to an ease with these differences and a sense of common interests. Moreover, among the young, 'both white and non-white, neighbourhood ethnic diversity is positively associated with social cohesion'. Only among older, white, people, this is not the case (Sturges et al, 2014:1300-2 and 1304).

Yet immigration became a concern even in areas like Sunderland and Hartlepool where it has been relatively low. This is difficult to account for except as a general sentiment established through media representation rather than direct experience. The situation is fraught with contradictions: as one journalist has commented,

Polling shows that most people have a negative opinion of immigration, despite them not having any negative experience of it. In fact, people in areas with most immigrants are least likely to express anti-immigrant sentiment (Seymour, 2014, unpaginated).

Despite the evidence (above) that positive contact produces favourable attitudes, there were widespread expressions of the sentiment that immigration had been permitted to go too far. This produced difficulties for the Labour Party in particular, because they had been in power in the early 2000s when EU migration was opened up. More importantly, politically, is the accusation that it was 'Labour's decision to abandon our borders and encourage mass immigration from all over the world' that had transformed neighbourhoods to the point where longstanding residents, even members of "settled" immigrant communities, feel threatened. They become strangers in the place they grew up' (Richard Littlejohn, *The Daily Mail*, 28/7/06, quoted in Hickman et al. 2012: 24). This sense of embattlement in their own areas had been detected by researchers revisiting the site of one of the classic 1950s community

studies. The 'new East End' did not feel like theirs, reported many, longstanding largely white, older locals (Geoff Dench et al., 2006, criticised by Moore, 2008).

Politically, then, immigration had acquired a negative image in the early 2000s. Diversity is a social fact, as is multiculturalism, but 'the British political class has never done a good job at explaining what the point of large-scale immigration was and whose interests it was meant to serve. That is partly because those questions are hard to answer' (Goodhart, 2013; 161). Britain's NHS has been one organisation that has continually recruited abroad to maintain the numbers of doctors and nurses, yet the broader benefits of immigration have rarely been discussed, As Collier remarks, 'migration has been politicized before it has been analyzed' (Collier, 2013: 110-2). The belief that the welfare state and education are under pressure from migrants suggests that apparent competition for *state* rather than private-provided services induces resentment, particularly at a time of government austerity. In addition, the terrorist violence in 2005 and since, committed largely by UK-based and raised young people, provoked demands from David Cameron and his ministers for adherence to 'British values', which were held to consist of cultural and political traditions such as tolerance, democracy and the rule of law (Hickman et al. 2012:2; Sturgis et al., 2014: 1287). The link between political violence and cultural diversity may be spurious, but it has become entrenched in media and popular consciousness.

Conclusion

Sunderland therefore, despite its strong sense of uniqueness and distinctiveness, shares many attitudes with other areas in England. The senses of a lost history, of secure jobs and skilled industries that were allowed to die by an indifferent government, and of a present that is uncertain and subject to external control, combined to produce a strong and resentful vote against the EU. It was because Sunderland was the first to declare for 'Brexit' that it attracted attention, even though the 'leave' vote was higher elsewhere in the North East. At the end of 2016 the *Sunderland Echo* repeated its local poll that had, in May, accurately predicted the Referendum result. On this occasion, though, the poll of more than 3,000 respondents produced a majority for Remain. It is possible that many, faced with the uncertainties of the Brexit process, are rethinking their original decisions (Allison, 2016). The superficial certainty of the Referendum may have resulted in more doubts and volatility.

Voting Data

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