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## BREXIT POPULISM AND FANTASIES OF FULFILMENT

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## BREXIT POPULISM AND FANTASIES OF FULFILMENT

*For Leave voters the Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 was invested with hopes and dreams, of refound sovereignty and control, freedom and liberty, subjectivity and agency. Brexit was an opportunity for both new beginnings and a reclamation of British essences. Winning, however, has not provided the closure promised, and today Leave supporters often appear decidedly anxious and angry. Bringing together literature on ontological security with Lacanian understandings of the (always incomplete) nature of subjectivity, this paper provides an explanation for how it is that 'Brexit' became invested with such high hopes of fulfilment, but also why the populist 'fantasies' underpinning Brexit have inevitably fallen short. However, while closure around ontological security and subjectivity is impossible, the paper shows how the promise of fulfilment (and its inevitable failure) can be politically seductive and mobilising, is a central strategy of populist politics, but as such also one that is only likely to exacerbate the ontological anxieties and insecurities upon which populist politics preys.*

### Introduction

Following the Brexit referendum the media spotlight often focused on how the vote to leave the European Union generated deep feelings of anxiety amongst many Remain voters/supporters (see Browning 2018a). Less commented upon is that Leave voters increasingly have also exhibited similar concerns and anxieties. This is perhaps surprising given that it might be presumed that they would have welcomed the referendum result. Indeed, unexpected as it was, the result was met with joy and euphoria by some, generating a sense of emotional and ontological fulfilment of long held dreams, at least amongst avid Eurosceptics. But, for other Leave voters the result's unexpected nature caused anxiety – as exhibited in widespread exhortations that 'I never expected this to happen'. Over time anxiety amongst Leave voters has become more widespread, and often combined with expressions of anger. Fears of the referendum being 'stolen' and 'betrayed' have been palpable, with the euphoria of 23 June 2016 somewhat dissipated. Thus, while some Leave voters have exhibited

remorse, for others the unfolding of the Brexit process only seems to have consolidated a sense of political identity in polar opposition to that of Remainers.

This paper explores this prevailing sense of ontological anxiety and anger amongst Brexit supporters by focusing on how the referendum became invested with the emotional politics of identity and subjectivity. Obviously, non-identitarian arguments were also important in shaping voters' preferences, but for many the referendum became (or subsequently 'has become') a deeply emotional experience in which 'leaving' or 'remaining' in the EU has been ascribed with fundamental ontological significance. It is only by recognising this that manifestations of anxiety and anger amongst Leave voters really make sense.

To develop the argument, the paper first draws upon the ontological security literature in international relations, a literature that sets aside concerns with physical and economic security to focus on subjects' ability to keep existential anxieties at bay and to 'go on' in everyday life (Giddens 1991; Tillich 1952/2014) – what Laing (1959) referred to as the 'security of being'. Using this framework, the next section explores some of the ontological anxieties that played into (and were also cultivated during) the referendum campaign. To this extent the Leave campaign found fertile ground in feelings of ontological insecurity experienced across a wide cross-section of the population, often connected to a disparate sense of everyday economic, social and political crisis. Section three then develops a Lacanian-inspired emphasis on how subjects are drawn towards fantasmatic narratives of identification, narratives that promise to respond to the subject's desire for ontological security and to achieve a complete and full identity, but which are inevitably doomed to fail. This Lacanian turn provides an important addition to the developing work on ontological security, where the emphasis has been on establishing the extent to which subjects are driven by a need to cultivate a sense of stability around self-identity, but where less attention has been paid to why subjects become attached to particular identities in the first place (e.g. Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). As Solomon (2013: 103-4) highlights, this requires moving beyond concerns of social construction in order to explore how successful identity discourses activate affect and desire.

Section four applies this framework to show how the Leave campaign was built around a series of (populist) fantasy narratives promising freedom, liberation, subjectivity and agency, fantasies which while offering promises of fulfilment and closure, were often both highly nostalgic and incompatible. Particular attention is paid, however, to how Brexit fantasies were premised around an activating 'if only' element via the identification of obstacles to be overcome that provide added drama to the fantasy and also create space for a transgressive politics challenging established norms of political discourse. Section five then considers the Referendum's aftermath and explores how Brexit fantasies have failed to provide the fulfilment promised and why they are unlikely to do so no matter the final outcome of the Brexit negotiations. This section therefore provides an explanation for the (re)emergence of ontological anxieties amongst Leave voters, despite their victory – anxieties that are not least generated by the inherent contradictoriness of different Brexit fantasies. However, instead of resulting in their decline it is shown how Brexit fantasies have rather been reactivated through a heightened politics of polarisation between Leavers and Remainers.

In conclusion, the paper argues that while the promise of closure central to populist fantasies that have underpinned much of the politics of Brexit has been emotionally seductive and politically mobilising it is also fundamentally problematic, offering impossible promises of fulfilment that may therefore only end up further enhancing feelings of disillusionment, alienation and ontological anxiety amongst those to whom they appeal. In doing so, however, it is raising significant challenges for a polity in which social trust is declining.

### **Ontological Security**

The referendum's unexpected outcome has resulted in various attempts to account for it. Explanations vary in terms of identifying and emphasising different political, cultural, economic and social factors. While drawing on these, this paper emphasises more psychological dimensions by engaging literatures on ontological security and Lacanian notions of subjectivity. We start with questions of ontological security, the aim being to show that come the referendum campaign an environment of widespread societal anxiety and

ontological insecurity existed with which Leave campaign arguments resonated and further cultivated.

Ontological security has a rich heritage, but is fundamentally concerned with people's ability to 'go on' with their everyday lives without slipping into melancholic or psychotic states (Giddens 1991: 35). This should not be taken for granted. For example, amongst others (e.g. Kirkegaard 1980) Giddens (1991: 36-7) has argued that we are always only a short step away from being overwhelmed by existential anxieties about the contingent nature of existence and foreboding dread that our sense of being in the world might be destabilised. Although the most obvious cause of existential anxiety relates to anxieties of death and non-being, existential anxieties can also be connected to a foreboding sense of meaninglessness and emptiness in life, or to feelings of guilt and shame (Tillich 2014: 38-51).

Because these anxieties are a fundamental element of existence, they cannot be eradicated. Mechanisms are therefore needed, Giddens (1991: 37) argues, that enable us to 'bracket out' such anxieties from everyday life. We need, it is argued, to establish a sense of confidence and trust in the world around us, to generate a sense of continuity, stability and order (Noble 2005: 113). Various things can help in this regard, although several are normally viewed as essential. First, subjects need to establish a sense of biographical continuity by cultivating narratives of self-identity that locate them in the world and in relation to others. These narratives help provide a framework through which everyday events and interactions can be understood (Giddens 1991: 39; Kinnvall 2004: 746; Steele 2008: 10-12), but also help establish space for agency and provide the grounds for recognition upon which feelings of status and self-esteem often depend (Kustermans and Ringmar 2011).

Second, subjects also need to establish routines that serve to reinforce such self-biographical narratives. Routines help provide a stable set of expectations about the nature of one's environment, are typically connected to one's work, family and social life, and as such may often appear mundane (Giddens 1991: 39). As Elias (2000) has shown, though, despite their mundanity everyday habits and routines are also frequently inscribed with deep significance as markers of normatively accepted forms of behaviour demarcating the civilised from the uncivilised. Indeed, when disrupted routines can become politically and ontologically salient.

This was the case following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, when reaffirming routinised social practices of being 'en terrasse' became the basis for a politicised show of resilience and a civilisationally-inflected ontological statement of self-identity (Browning 2018b).

Third, ontological security-seeking subjects are typically driven towards cultivating a particular place and set of relationships as representing 'home' (Dupuis and Thorns 1998), and where a particular notion of home becomes integrated as a fundamental part of routinized narratives of self-identity. 'Home' contributes to ontological security by locating the subject in time and space, representing a place of roots and belonging, safety and certitude in an otherwise changing world, and a secure base upon which identities can be constructed (Kinnvall 2004: 747; Noble 2005: 113; Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 43). Thus, while ontological security is a psychological need it is also intimately tied to the material environment and to specific places in which deeply emotional meanings of permanence, continuity and belonging are invested (Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 30). Spatialisations of home, however, are contextual rather than fixed. Home may be one's house, town or region depending on the situation. It may also be the 'national home', a notion particularly pertinent for this paper (also see Kinnvall's and Steele's papers in this volume). Indeed, notions of nationhood are often central to people's biographical narratives of self-identity and their sense of self-esteem and ontological security (Kinnvall 2004: 742-4; Krolkowski 2008), and not least become routinised and reinforced in the everyday activities, symbols and rituals of 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Skey 2011).

Importantly, if one's sense of home becomes unsettled (for instance, because it is no longer recognised by others) this can disrupt feelings of belonging embedded within established narratives of self-identity and habituated routines, generating anxieties and imperilling ontological security (Noble 2005: 114). Since the referendum this has been a common experience for many people of (perceived) foreign extraction who have found their rights of belonging questioned – as evident, for instance, in the long running and unresolved issue of the rights and status of EU citizens post-Brexit – and who have occasionally been told to 'go back home' to places they no longer identify with. Such people have experienced deep anxieties as established narratives of self-identity have been rejected, with many reporting

significant disruption to their daily routines (e.g. where they shop, who they talk to, in what language) (Browning 2018a). However, such anxieties arguably also fed into the Leave vote as well.

This identifying and targeting of perceived 'others' points to another dynamic of ontological security seeking, which is that when ontological anxieties do intrude subjects are liable to engage in diversionary acts of securitisation (Rumelili 2015: 14). As Tillich (2014: 35-7) explains, because existential anxieties are ultimately about the unknown they are difficult to focus on. They lack tangibility and as such there is nothing to fix and resolve. This, he argues, is an unbearable situation and results in subjects shifting their focus away from anxieties about the unknown onto identifiable objects of fear that can be targeted for action (Tillich 2014: 37). Thus, existential anxieties and feelings of ontological insecurity are often salved by identifying and securitising threatening others that can be targeted and dealt with, like enemy states and immigrant communities (Mitzen 2006; Croft 2012). While this can exacerbate physical insecurities the identification of threatening others can be ontologically affirming because it provides a clear basis for (re)establishing a sense of self-identity (in terms of who we are not) and an ordered cosmological worldview (e.g. Rumelili 2015).

### **Pre-Referendum Ontological Insecurities**

Having outlined core claims about the nature of ontological security, the next task is to demonstrate that the Brexit vote was – at least in part – a response to ontological insecurities evident throughout parts of British society and typically connected to a disparate sense of economic, social and political crisis and marginalisation experienced at an everyday level. This is evident at least insofar as post-referendum analysis and reporting has clearly demonstrated that many saw the referendum as an opportunity to lodge a 'protest' about other things, with Britain's EU membership a secondary concern (e.g. Harris 2016).

Obviously, both Leave and Remain voters comprised a diversity of positions, experiences and motivations. It is therefore important to be cautious when accounting for why the vote split how it did. One of the more sophisticated attempts has been offered by Finlayson (2016) who

argues that the referendum probably tells us more about people's experiences of globalisation than their experience of the EU. Broadly speaking, Finlayson argues that the more people felt they had benefitted culturally and economically from globalisation the more likely they were to vote Remain, while those who felt they had lost out in these terms tended to vote Leave. However, he also argues there was an outlier group of people who, while feeling they have benefitted culturally and economically from globalisation, also feel they *could have benefited more*. For them the EU has been a brake on progress and they also tended to vote Leave. This group is important, and is one we will come back to later because it points to how the Leave campaign comprised notably contrasting visions of the country's future, and how following the referendum tensions within the Leave camp have emerged.

Finlayson's framework can be read as emphasising a rather rational actor, cost-benefit and calculative approach to voting behaviour. This, however, is to underplay its ontological security dimensions. On the economic front this is particularly evident amongst those who feel they have lost out, becoming increasingly marginalised and typically occupying positions of economic precarity. Hopkin (2017: 466) argues that for them the Brexit vote was driven by an underlying sentiment of economic protectionism, part of a broader 'revolt against market liberalisation' and 'what appeared to be an unshakeable pro-market consensus in British politics'. However, as elsewhere this anti-liberal sentiment has become nationally inflected. Social anxiety about the economic upheavals caused by deregulated capitalism and its unbalanced impacts on the population have often been transposed into fears over immigration. Thus, even though the evidence concerning the perceived detrimental impact of immigration on living standards is contested, ever since the EU's 2004 enlargement, following which hundreds of thousands of East Europeans moved to the UK, economic questions about welfare and living standards have become fused with concerns about migration. Migrants have therefore been blamed for fuelling unemployment, for creating a downward pressure on wages, as well as putting increased pressure on social services (Dorey 2017: 36), claims most vividly captured during the referendum in Nigel Farage's unveiling of the infamous 'Breaking Point' poster that openly preyed on people's anxieties about migration and suggested that only by leaving the EU would it be possible to prevent continued uncontrolled mass migration into the UK (Hopkin 2017: 472).

In respect of cultural aspects, David Goodhart (2017) has distinguished between ‘the Anywheres’ – essentially cosmopolitan liberals at home with globalisation – and ‘the Somewheres’ – essentially those whose identities are more rooted, generally less well educated and more socially conservative. For Goodhart (2017: vii), Brexit highlighted how the Anywheres had come to dominate the social and political landscape, failing to take heed of the legitimate concerns of the Somewheres. Typically, ‘the Somewheres’ have also been taken as representative of the ‘(English) white working class’, or what is sometimes referred to as the new ‘left behind’. While, the racialized nature of such claims does not necessarily equate with economic realities (i.e. the white working class is no more likely to be facing economic precarity than minority populations), it is evident that white working class people often *feel* that they have been neglected while other groups have benefited at their expense (Bhambra 2017: 221; McKenzie 2015).

The reference to ‘(English) white working class’ above is also worth paying attention to because it ultimately transpired that the referendum split along national lines, with England and Wales voting in favour of Leave (respectively 53.4%-46.6% / 52.5%-47.5%), with Scotland and Northern Ireland voting Remain (respectively 62%-38% / 55.5%-44.6%) (Henderson et al 2017: 631). Particularly interesting, however, is that it also appears that there was a significant correlation in England between voters’ prioritisation of their English identity (over that of being British) and their likelihood of voting Leave, with those emphasising a British identity more likely to vote Remain. A similar trend does not appear to have been so obvious in the other constituent nations of the UK, with this leading Henderson et al., (2016; 2017) to conclude that ultimately ‘Brexit was made in England’.

Evident here, therefore, is the extent to which during the Referendum, in England at least, a sense of national identity had become constituted in opposition to EU membership. In this respect the EU became the target of rising populist sentiment that has become widespread across Europe. For Bonikowski (2017: 203), this populist tide is indicative of how many people have increasingly become ‘alienated from mainstream culture’, no longer seeing ‘themselves as part of the changing cultural landscape’ and where they perceive ‘overzealous’ and ‘omnivorous’ liberal elites protecting and appropriating ‘the cultural practices of ethnic

minorities’, while ‘the culture of lower-status members of the ethnic majority – once seen as inhabiting the nation’s “heartland” – is increasingly devalued as retrograde’.

Such people have not only become alienated, they have also been socially stigmatised and shamed. As Kenny (2016: 326-7) notes, there has been a long tradition amongst British liberal cosmopolitan elites of viewing ‘Englishness’ as ‘regressive, nostalgic and anti-modern’, with such ‘little Englandism’ depicted as insular, backward, chauvinistic and a threat to the multicultural union and Britain’s EU membership. Indeed, in this respect Englishness has been stigmatised in ways Welsh and Scottish identity have not and which may itself partly account for the role of Englishness-identification in the Leave vote. However, since the financial crash and the onset of austerity economics a decade ago such stigmatisations have only taken on enhanced form with politicians and the press embracing the language of the ‘deserving vs. undeserving poor’, the ‘striving vs. non-striving’ and not least of ‘scroungers’ to describe (undeserving) welfare recipients, or the descriptor ‘white van man’ as a short-hand designation of the regressive values seen as embodied by a particular community. And all this at a time when many local communities have been hollowed out with the closure of community centres, transport links, libraries, children’s and health services while many low to middle-end jobs were also being lost (Benn 2015: 330-1; McKenzie 2015). It is therefore unsurprising that the Leave campaign’s suggestion that Remainers comprised an out of touch metropolitan liberal elite contemptuous and patronising of ‘ordinary’ British people for failing to embrace multiculturalism resonated with some (Dorey 2017: 36-7). In ontological security terms the governing elite no longer appeared able or willing to provide support for the (ontological) security of many of its citizens (Marlow 2002), and was indeed actively undermining it through practices of stigmatisation and shaming that questioned both their sense of identity and their value as citizens. This was reflected in the rising support in the years before the referendum – and particularly in England – for the anti-establishment, anti-elitist, anti-immigrant and anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP), as well as in the referendum itself.

As noted, anxieties of economic precarity and cultural alienation have often been transposed into a securitisation of migrants as economic and cultural threats. Indeed, post-referendum analysis suggests that negative attitudes towards immigration was a solid predictor of Leave

support (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017: 458). However, while anti-immigrant sentiment was important, leave votes peaked in areas that had experienced rapid ethnic change over a short period of time before the referendum, rather than in places with long established high levels of ethnic and cultural diversity. For example, Boston, which had the highest support for Leave (75%), had experienced a sixteen-fold increase in the size of its non-British population in the period 2005 (1000) – 2015 (16,000) (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017: 454-5). In such places feelings of instability, loss of community identity, and anxieties about the future were palpable and were places where the Brexit mantra of ‘take back control’ resonated strongly.

When combined, these economic and cultural factors have ultimately destabilised peoples’ sense of belonging, with increasing feelings of becoming strangers in their own ‘home’. Home, in short, has stopped being a sanctuary of stability, order and ontological security, with this generating deep feelings of anxiety. Indicative of this is ethnographic research undertaken by Lisa Mckenzie (2017) who spent the years 2014-2017 undertaking weekly walks and coffee chats with working class people in East London and in ex-mining towns of Nottinghamshire. She reports a visceral sense of unfairness, injustice and exclusion, of people born and bred in East London, for instance, but who now feel like they are living on a ‘Reservation’, squeezed out in an ongoing process of gentrification that prioritises the wishes of bankers, financiers and foreigners with money. There is a sense of alienation, invisibility and political remoteness, of no longer belonging, and importantly, of no-longer being welcome, but feeling utterly powerless to do anything about it (Mckenzie 2017: 274). For Mckenzie (2017: 277) the post-referendum popularisation of the term the ‘left behind’ utterly ‘misunderstands and underestimates the depth and intensity of the devastation that has been experienced by working-class people, their communities and their identities for over 30 years’.

In this context, feeling abandoned, financially struggling and alienated from their own ‘home’ – indeed, sometimes made physically homeless – basic ontological security mechanisms of developing a sense of biographical continuity reinforced through habituated routines have typically been disrupted or denied to them through processes of economic and cultural marginalisation, stigmatisation and shaming. Insofar as new biographical narratives and routines have emerged they often reinforce this sense of alienation, abandonment and non-

belonging.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that for many people the referendum became understood as an opportunity to lodge a protest, to be an agent, if only for once, and leave some kind of imprint or mark (e.g. Mckenzie 2017: 275): ‘a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to wreak revenge on “globalists” and the “liberal elite”’ (Dorey 2017: 38). Indeed, this correlates with other research which shows that people who feel they have little to lose or feel powerless are more likely to have a higher tolerance for risk and support change, which in the context of the referendum of course, was accompanied by messages of ‘taking back control’ (Henderson et al 2017: 641-3).

### **Lacanian Fantasy, Nostalgia and Transgression**

During the referendum Leave campaigners sought to capitalise on and cultivate these societal manifestations of anxiety and ontological insecurity. However, to understand why such arguments were effective the theoretical approach to ontological security needs to be developed. This is because, despite its emphasis on subjects’ need to develop and routinize biographical narratives of self-identity, the ontological security literature is essentially silent on how subjects become attached to those identities in the first place (Browning and Joenniemi 2017). Lacanian psychoanalysis can offer a way forward because it moves beyond concerns of social construction to consider why some identity discourses appear to be more tempting than others, and therefore more likely to stick and exert affective hold over subjects (Solomon 2013: 103-4).

Lacanian psychoanalysis starts from the premise that the idea of a single, coherent and unified subject is nothing more than ‘an imaginary construct that the individual needs to believe in to compensate for a constitutive lack that lies at the core of her (or his) identity’ (Epstein 2011: 334). Subjects, it is argued, do not enter the world with pre-formed identities but are ‘thrown into’ a world that is already discursively and symbolically structured (Glynos and Howarth 2008: 164). To function in this world, subjects are therefore impelled to engage in acts of identification, identifying with various socially-inscribed signifiers that help generate a

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., ‘Peter’ whose regular walks round East London precisely reinforce these aspects (Mckenzie 2017: 272-3).

social identity and presence in the world. Such signifiers will typically include a name, gender, nationality and various role identities. These signifiers, however, are already embedded in pre-existing social understandings, discourses and practices of what being those things means. The subject can therefore never fully possess or 'own' the signifiers it identifies with. This entails two things. First, it emphasises subjectivity's 'radically social' nature, as we only become subjects in the process of identifying with signifiers that are in some fundamental sense alien to us. Second, Lacanians argue that while identification is central to establishing a social-identity and acting in the world, identifications are never fully satisfying as they can never fully express or capture the subject's complete being and thus can never provide a categorical anchor for self-identity (Eberle forthcoming p.4). In a changing world, subjects must therefore always be open to embracing new identifications, as failure to do so threatens to expose the underpinning sense of 'lack' that identifications seek to resolve (Glynos and Howarth 2008: 162-3).

Importantly, subjects' identifications are often embedded within *fantasmatic narratives* that are fundamental in keeping ontological anxieties at bay and that respond to the subject's desire for a full and complete identity (Eberle forthcoming p.4; Arfi 2010). Such fantasies are not 'unreal' – as in popular understandings of the word – but rather help 'connect subjects to social orders by arousing desire and channelling it' (Eberle forthcoming p.3) and are therefore central to the very constitution of social reality. As such, fantasies can help us understand why subjects become affectively invested in some discourses and biographical narratives of self-identity, and not others. Fantasies do this by typically directing the subject's sense of ontological lack towards an imaginary element or object that is seen to hold the promise of fulfilment (Eberle 2016: 56, 61). Such imaginary elements might take the form of actual material objects, as evidenced in how consumers seek fulfilment through purchasing branded products, although hopes for fulfilment may also be invested in particular partners and relationships. However, it is also often linked to more abstract concepts and political goals, as in fantasies associated with 'freedom', 'sovereignty' or 'liberty' (Eberle forthcoming p.4-5). Fantasies work best, however, when they appeal to signifiers which have to some extent become internalised and embedded in subjects' biographical narratives of self-identity, thereby exerting the most affective pull on them. Thus, while identities are always in flux, subjects do still tend to orient towards and assume as their own particular signifiers as

somehow central to their sense of self-hood and in which they have become particularly invested (Ahmed 2000: 127; Howarth 2014: 14; Laclau 2005: 110-15). Fantasies appealing to those signifiers are therefore more likely to be emotionally mobilising since ultimately they harness signifiers subjects enjoy identifying with (Eberle 2016: 52).

The affective pull of fantasies can also be influenced by their particular form, which in the case of Brexit was of a generally nostalgic orientation. Nostalgia, of course, refers to a rosy view of a prior age, while its Greek origins in *nostos* ('to return home') and *algos* ('pain') suggest a form of homesickness or 'longing for home'. In nationalist form this becomes a longing, or even mourning, for the homeland (Hutcheon and Valdés 1998-2000: 20-22; Žižek 2009). Nostalgic narratives therefore activate a sense of loss and alienation akin to Lacanian accounts of subjectivity. Nostalgia, of course, not only looks back, but also entails a critique of the present and a future vision. It dangles a fantasy of the recovery of that which was lost, but since nostalgia is always of an imagined idealised past, recovery is ultimately impossible. This, though, does not undermine its emotional appeal, which also stems from its criticism of the present as falling short, contaminated, messy and betrayed. Thus, while the past is sanitised as a time when things were complete, stable and safe – i.e. a period of ontological security – the present is depicted as lacking, a period of anxiety and ontological insecurity, a past betrayed or stolen (Hutcheon and Valdés 1998-2000: 20; Velikonja 2009: 538).

Fantasy narratives in general are similarly structured. As Arfi (2010: 440) notes, while fantasies promise fulfilment, fulfilment always remains just out of reach. However, fantasies reactivate the desire for fulfilment and remain attractive to subjects because they include an 'if only' element, typically an obstacle to be overcome that is preventing the achievement of a full and stable identity. The fantasy is therefore kept alive by suggesting that actions need to be taken to remove the obstacle (Arfi 2010: 440). Regarding Brexit, the obstacle in Leave campaign fantasies variously appeared in the guise of the EU, immigrants and a self-interested metropolitan liberal elite. Fantasies can therefore further support processes of securitisation and enemy othering that establish a form of stability and ontological security by identifying threats that reaffirm the subject's sense of self-identity and that become a focus for action. Others/enemies therefore become constitutive parts of fantasies, as those obstacles that need to be overcome if fulfilment is to be achieved.

Closely linked is that fantasies also typically include a 'transgressive element', or what Žižek (1997: 25) refers to as an 'obscene supplement', that can further arouse desire but which is usually only alluded to in official language because it is seen to transgress established norms. For instance, in debates over immigration official rhetoric usually talks in dispassionate and technocratic terms about the effects of migration on communities, jobs and services, a language that reproduces liberal notions of decency and rationality, but where this also often entails allusions to a more transgressive rhetoric of racism and prejudice. As Eberle (forthcoming, pp.11-13) notes, transgressive rhetoric often ends up depicting the obstacle to our fulfilment as 'enjoying' themselves at our expense, as in populist accusations of immigrants laughing at us while simultaneously stealing our jobs and enjoying our welfare (also Noble 2005: 119).

Key, however, is that while official and transgressive discourses may often appear to contradict each other, they are also often mutually supportive. For example, during the referendum the Leave campaign was split between different groups. The 'official' campaign group 'Vote Leave', tended to focus on economic arguments. In contrast, the unofficial 'Leave.EU', which was more closely aligned to UKIP, put enhanced emphasis on immigration and was behind the emotive and arguably racist 'Breaking Point' poster, which Vote Leave actually criticised. Rather than undermine the Leave campaign the different groups involved arguably created sufficient ambiguity for people to feel they could still respectably vote 'leave', even though they may have been at least partially motivated by the transgressive elements of the Leave.EU campaign (Wincott 2017: 684-5). In short, they need not feel ashamed.

### **The Leave Campaign and Fantasies of Brexit**

Elements of Lacanian fantasy were clearly evident on the Leave side during the Brexit referendum campaign. In this respect, 'Brexit' became positioned as an 'empty signifier' – a signifier lacking specific meaning but which comes to stand in for and unify other (potentially contradictory) claims and demands to which it is seen as equivalent (Laclau 2005: 154). Thus,

'Brexit' became a concept, aspiration and demand into which various (divergent) desires for redress and fulfilment could be channelled. In particular, the Leave campaign was built around a series of (populist) fantasy narratives promising freedom and liberty, sovereignty and control, subjectivity and agency that tapped into signifiers embedded within national narratives of self-identity, that therefore exerted an affective pull and with which many people enjoy identifying.

Populism can be defined in various ways, although as Bonikowski (2017: 184) notes, there is general agreement that it entails a 'moral vilification of elites and the veneration of ordinary people, who are seen as the sole legitimate source of political power'. As Bossetta (2017) argues, populism also often appears as a performative 'political style', a way of arguing and framing events. While the populist style entails appealing to the people and pitting them against an elite, it also entails a willingness to 'exhibit bad manners' and 'to perform a sense of crisis' (see also Homolar and Scholz this volume). This contrasts with a more 'technocratic' political style that tries to 'appeal to expertise or scientific knowledge, exhibit[s] good manners, and aim[s] to promote a sense of stability or measured progress' (Bossetta 2017: 719).

Although an ideal type, the populist/technocratic distinction captures the nature of the referendum debate rather well. Thus, while the Remain camp emphasised enrolling experts and mobilising academic and technical analyses of the costs of leaving, thereby appealing to the electorate's rational deliberative capacities, the Leave camp unceremoniously rejected the reports and analyses of experts as the worthless products of a 'corrupt' self-interested elite, instead appealing to the electorate's emotional predispositions and experiences. For example, in their analysis of over 18,000 tweets put out by the three main campaign groups, Usherwood and Wright (2017: 376, 384) note that while both sides engaged in a certain amount of negative campaigning and personal attacks the 'Stronger In' campaign was more prone to emphasise 'evidence-based arguments'. Indeed, insofar as their evidence also highlights notable differences in the twitter activities and messages of Vote Leave and Leave.EU, they also highlight how the two groups were essentially able to target different audiences (Usherwood and Wright 2017: 385) – and by extrapolation sanitise voting leave for those who may have been uncomfortable about the transgressive messages of Leave.EU.

Moreover, while it is certainly the case that the leaders of Remain – learning ‘lessons’ from the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014 – by and large ran a negative campaign emphasising the costs of leaving as opposed to extolling the virtues of EU membership, it was the Leave campaign that successfully managed to cast this as ‘Project Fear’, which in turn became a label through which all expert opinion mobilised by the Remain side could be discredited (Usherwood and Wright 2017: 384-5). Thus, while the Remain argument was based on the notion that EU membership is a source of stability and ontological security, with Brexit threatening uncertainty, chaos, crisis and ontological insecurity, the Leave campaign countered that we are experiencing chaos, crisis and ontological insecurity *right now*, while Brexit will bring order, stability and control.

Combined, these elements of incivility, anti-elitism and casting people’s social and cultural identities and economic livelihoods as imperilled is captured well in this (abridged) exchange between Michael Gove, a Vote Leave campaign leader, and Sky News presenter Faisal Islam just two days before the vote.

GOVE I think the people in this country have had enough of experts from organisations with acronyms saying they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong.

ISLAM People in this country have had enough of experts. What do you mean by that?

GOVE These people are the same ones who got consistently wrong... It’s a faith, Faisal, in the British people to make the right decision.

ISLAM Blind faith...

GOVE I don’t think it is, because one of the striking things about this debate is that those who are arguing that we should remain have a vested financial interest in the operation of the European Union.

ISLAM Ah right, so are they lying, are they stupid or is there a conspiracy?

GOVE No, I’m pointing out that the majority of people in this country are suffering as a result of our membership in the European Union. Their wages are lower... access to public services is restricted... The European Union has hollowed out communities across this country... Now you can say that their concerns don’t matter...

ISLAM I didn’t say that.

GOVE You were dismissing the concerns of working people. You're on the side, Faisal, of the elites, I'm on the side of the people.<sup>2</sup>

In line with the predicted structure of fantasy narratives, evident here is the EU and a conspiring economic elite depicted as a unified 'they' benefiting and enjoying themselves at the people's expense, an obstacle to the people's fulfilment. Such themes were a mainstay of the Leave campaign, with Nigel Farage of Leave.EU similarly railing against the EU's destruction of the UK economy and 'a political class that has become so politically correct that it is so bound up in our membership in the European Union that it doesn't actually believe that we should put the interests of this country and the people of this country first, and I say, "Shame on them"' (e.g. Farage 2015).

This notion of the EU enjoying themselves at our expense was also the explicit message of the infamous red bus of the Vote Leave campaign, which toured the country emblazoned with the message: 'We send the EU £350 million a week. Let's fund our NHS instead. Vote Leave. Let's take back control'. Such arguments tapped into a longer-running seam of Euroscepticism in British politics that EU membership had stripped Britain of its sovereignty, with the ultimate aim to create a European super-state (Dorey 2017: 30-1). It was to such concerns that slogans of 'Take Back Control' and 'Make Britain Great Again' were directed, slogans that raised anxieties of further loss of control and subjugation should the referendum be lost. As such, Leave campaign messages also appealed directly to nationalist desires that the country maintain/recapture its sense of 'distinction', something it was argued the EU was subverting through its overbearing laws and regulations. As the Vote Leave website argued:

Because EU law is supreme over UK law we cannot scrap any of these new rules... *This loss of control is deeply damaging and undemocratic. Elections should be about the public choosing who makes the laws. Instead, all our politicians have to do what the EU says - not what we say* (original emphasis).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> UK Justice Secretary Michael Gove interviewed on Sky News by Faisal Islam, 'Gove: Britons "Have had enough of experts"', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGgiGtJk7MA> 21 June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Voteleavetakecontrol.org, 'Briefing: Taking back control from Brussels', [http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/briefing\\_control.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/briefing_control.html).

As already indicated, while in such rhetoric Brussels/the EU and a conspiring co-opted elite were presented as an obstacle to ‘becoming’, the obscene supplement or transgressive element came in the depiction of immigrants as a cause of multiple economic, social, cultural, but also physical insecurities in the country. ‘Take Back Control’ was another way of saying ‘Keep them out/Send them back’ and was a message that clearly resonated. For instance, one post-referendum survey suggested that one-third of Brexit voters saw voting leave as offering ‘the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders’ (cited in Goodwin and Milazzo 2017: 456). During the referendum campaign this was most clearly visualised in the highly provocative and controversial ‘Breaking Point’ poster, but also in a Leave.EU tweet on 13 June that linked shootings in Orlando, Florida, to EU free movement – a tweet that followed earlier claims that EU membership left the UK open to Paris-style terror attacks.<sup>4</sup> It was also evident, however, in Nigel Farage’s propensity to flourish his ‘Europeanised’ burgundy passport during speeches as symbolic of Britain’s subjugation and lack of control over migration/borders, and his warning that what this actually signified was that there were 508 million people who, because of their rights to such a passport, could enter the UK unhindered (Farage 2016). However, insofar as the EU/Brussels was also varyingly compared to the Soviet Union (White 2016) and Hitler’s Germany (Ross 2016), then transgressive elements took other forms as well – with this feeding upon a longer national narrative of Europe as a source of threats and Churchillian-type fantasies of Britain as a defender of European freedoms embedded in the ongoing cultural resonances of World War II.<sup>5</sup>

The campaign, however, was also notable for its nostalgic resonances, although these took different forms depending on the fantasy in play. In this respect, two broadly conceived – and somewhat incompatible – fantasies were appealed to, both promising fulfilment if key obstacles were removed by voting leave. The first was targeted at the so called ‘left behind’ and appealed to sentiments critical of globalisation, economic transformation, multiculturalism and immigration, all of which we have seen have left many people feeling

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<sup>4</sup> Rowena Mason (2016) ‘Leave.EU condemned for linking Orlando attack to referendum vote’, *The Guardian* 13 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/13/shameful-leaveeu-tweet-uk-face-orlando-style-attack>

<sup>5</sup> Which following the referendum were once again in evidence with the 2017 box office success of the films *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*, both of which emphasised a Britain standing alone.

economically, socially and ontologically insecure. Nostalgia, here, was about returning to a national homeland associated with community cohesion, job security and belonging – a world before all the venture capitalists, mass immigration and EU regulations, a world where we had sovereignty and control. Much of this was encapsulated in Farage’s waving of the passport and his looking forward to a day when the words ‘European Union’ were removed from its cover (Farage 2016). Such a fantasy could be tailored to specific audiences. For example, speaking in Grimsby over a year before the official campaign began, Farage (2015) argued that on leaving the EU Grimsby would become a ‘great fishing port’ once more as it would no longer be subject to the quota system of the European Common Fisheries Policy.

The other fantasy was in some respects at odds with the first, but not categorically so. If some people hankered for more economic protectionism, others argued EU membership had curtailed free trade and the benefits of globalisation. This more ‘Thatcherite’ position essentially views the EU as unduly protectionist and is out of line with the first fantasy by calling for more exposure to globalisation and free movement – e.g. on immigration it entailed calls to end the discriminatory preference in favour of EU migrants over others.

Politically, however, the fantasy called for a rediscovery of British values of liberty and freedom that have a long heritage, especially in English nationalism (Kenny 2016: 329). In contrast to Remainers’ criticisms that Leavers were parochial xenophobes, Boris Johnson (2016) proclaimed Brexit to be ‘the great project of European liberalism’, while it is the European Union ‘that now represents the ancien regime’. Channelling Shakespeare’s Henry V, he argued: ‘it is we few, we happy few who have the inestimable advantage of believing strongly in our cause, and that we will be vindicated by history; and we will win for exactly the same reason that the Greeks beat the Persians at Marathon – because they are fighting for an outdated absolutist ideology, and we are fighting for freedom’. Likewise, Michael Gove (2016) recalled the UK’s ‘distinguished global role in the past as an upholder and defender of liberal democratic values’, but whose capacities are ‘currently vitiated and undermined by the operation of the EU and its institutions’. The nostalgia here is more one directed to Britain’s failure to deal with its post-colonial decline and a continued hankering for global status through which many Britons still derive a sense of self-esteem and ontological security

and which was often evident during the campaign (and subsequently) in ideas of Britain re-finding a global role through its Commonwealth links (Younge 2018).

### **False Promises, Failed Fantasies and Rising Disillusion**

Since the referendum result promised fantasies of fulfilment have evidently failed to deliver. Insofar as Brexit became a signifier for unleashing frustrations and anxieties often only tangentially connected to the EU, this is perhaps unsurprising. This was not how it was supposed to be. Immediately following the referendum result, Nigel Farage, in euphoric and populist fashion, proclaimed ‘a victory for real people. A victory for ordinary people. A victory for decent people’ (*The Guardian* 24 June 2016) and declared that 23 June should become the country’s new ‘Independence Day’ to be ritualised and celebrated annually. This, of course, perpetuated the fantasy of Brexit as a moment of fulfilment, suggesting that Britain had now won its freedom from a colonial EU – ironies of post-Brexit Commonwealth fantasies notwithstanding (Ahmed 2016).

Such euphoria, however, dissipated rather quickly into a mixture of heightened anxieties and anger amongst Leave voters. There are perhaps several reasons for this. First, immediately following the referendum it became evident that quite a number of Leave voters were not only surprised to have won, but never actually wanted to – with this activating anxieties of guilt and shame. In the weeks following the referendum social media and newspaper reports were full of Leave voters expressing regret and shock that their vote mattered.<sup>6</sup> A common sentiment was that: ‘I’m shocked & worried. I voted Leave but didn’t think my vote would count – I never thought it would actually happen’ (@LauraTopham 2016<sup>7</sup>). Such people frequently emphasised that they had just been expressing a protest, but did not necessarily want to leave the EU, while the responsibility of ‘what they had done’ now bore heavily on them, with people expressing feelings of shame, of needing to apologise to their friends and

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, a Survation poll in the Mail on Sunday found that 7% of respondents regretted their ‘Leave’ vote, equivalent to about 1.1 million people (Ashmore 2016).

<sup>7</sup> LauraTopham – twitter account (24 June 2016)

<https://twitter.com/LauraTopham/status/746260604936200192>

family, and even of 'want[ing] my country back' (e.g. Masri 2016; McVeigh and Fishwick 2016; Harris 2016). Many of this group also expressed anger at having been 'lied' to by the Leave campaign, especially over the headline '£350 million for the NHS', a claim Nigel Farage backed away from within hours of the vote declaration (McCann and Morgan 2016). People spoke about feeling 'duped' at having been 'seduced into something that seemed fantastic, delightful, and even romantic' (Tony P in Nordqvist 2016 comments section), but also of 'feeling sick' and 'hating themselves' for believing the lies (Nagesh 2016). Instead of self-esteem, the immediate aftermath generated a certain amount of self-loathing for some Leave voters.

It needs to be emphasised, however, that such remorse was a minority position. Even so, for those who did embrace the victory dislocatory anxieties have not been uncommon. In part this has been generated by feelings of being (unfairly) maligned and stigmatised by Remainers as stupid, backward, old, anti-modern, parochial, xenophobic. However, for this group anxieties connected to meaning have also been activated, that have stoked feelings of resentment, anger and confusion. Brexit was presented as something categorical and definitive, as moving from one epoch (of EU subjugation) into a new, better one (of freedom and liberty), where new rules applied, and where sovereignty and control were returned to the British people. Brexit therefore offered up a new grand historical narrative of cosmological ordering. While it may come to be seen this way the contemporary reality is very different (Wincott 2017: 684). Brexit has turned out to be messy, with no clear sense of what it even means – as epitomised by Prime Minister May's platitudes about 'Brexit meaning Brexit' and a 'red, white and blue Brexit' (Elgot 2016) – and where the cosmological promise has turned out to be a highly contested work in progress.

Boris Johnson's fantasy that 'we can have our cake and eat it' (Dunn 2016), has rather quickly unwound in view of the compromises and trade-offs the Brexit negotiations inevitably require (Wincott 2017: 681-2; Bale 2017). In these debates the different fantasies underpinning Brexit rub up against each other and where aspirations for global free trade deals conflict with desires for economic protectionism and (indigenous) workers' rights that informed many Leave voters' preferences. Indeed, insofar as it is the 'globalist Brexiteers' (people like Jacob Rees Mogg and John Redwood) that have managed to set themselves up in parliament

through the European Research Group (ERG) as guardians of Brexit, endorsing radical free trade proposals like those promoted by the group Economists for Free Trade (2018), then this has stoked anxieties on the ground about what ‘taking back control’ will mean in practice, and ultimately about being sold out, and where opposition to a ‘Tory Brexit’ has become a rallying call on the Left. The fishermen of Grimsby and elsewhere, for instance, no longer see the fantasy they were promised by Nigel Farage, but fear they are just a bargaining chip for a government seeking a wider Brexit deal with Brussels (Roberts 2018). Also notable, however, is disgruntlement at the government’s decision to award the contract for producing the new post-Brexit and now – in a nostalgic nod to the past – blue British passport to a Franco-Dutch company. For Brexiteers this is a perverse decision sullyng everything – including the sense of identity, ontological security and self-esteem – which presenting the new document at passport control was supposed to symbolise and routinise (the reclaiming of sovereignty and freedom from EU standardisation) (Stewart and Rawlinson 2018).

Moreover, anxieties connected to status and standing, but also to home, have also returned. However, if prior to the referendum such narratives reflected the pressure and effects of globalisation and immigration on local communities, post-referendum anxieties of home, status and standing primarily have been connected with the repositioning of Britain in the world. Both during the referendum and after a core claim was that Britain’s EU membership had held it back, preventing it from realising its self-identity and truly flourishing. Since the referendum Theresa May has expressed this view in various speeches. As she argues, Britain ‘voted to leave the EU and embrace the world’, ‘to build a truly Global Britain’, to ‘rediscover its role as a great, global, trading nation’ (May 2017b). The unexpected result, however, was profoundly disorienting in the corridors of power. Efforts are therefore underway to find a new orientation and ‘home base’ for the country and which has seen particular emphasis being placed on links to America and the Anglosphere, but also the Commonwealth. Both have so far proven unsatisfactory with a sense remaining of Britain being a country adrift, desperate to retain a sense of ‘greatness’ but increasingly in danger of sliding into obscurity. For example, attempts to reinvigorate notions of the UK and US as co-leaders of the liberal Free World (another nostalgic fantasy) (see May 2017a) have been fundamentally problematized by Donald Trump’s election and his emphasis on policies largely anathema to mainstream British views. In short, the US special relationship no longer offers the safe haven

of belonging and community, and the sense of vicariously appropriated status and self-esteem, it once did (Browning, Joenniemi and Steele forthcoming). Similarly, ideas of reclaiming a leadership role in the Commonwealth are also largely politely declined from members of that club. Brexit, therefore, only appears to have reaffirmed Dean Acheson's quip way back in 1962 that having lost an empire Britain is still to find a role.

We should perhaps not be surprised by any of this. As argued, while fantasies promise the 'full enjoyment of a stable and complete identity' (Eberle 2016: 61) by directing the subject's desire towards particular objects (e.g. sovereignty, independence and control) such fulfilment always remains just out of reach. Ultimately fantasies can never quite deliver. However, instead of discrediting them this is what keeps them alive and affectively mobilising. As Solomon (2013: 106) argues, 'If one were to find the "Thing" that would truly make one whole, *desire would die*, and subjectivity would evaporate. Without desire, the meaninglessness and ambiguity of the social world would set in' (original emphasis). As Eberle (2016: 63) argues, though, the problem with this is that 'fantasies can imprison us into a vicious circle if we become overinvested in them, one eternal oscillation between lack and desire, between the promise of full enjoyment and its partial, and ultimately dissatisfying bodily manifestations'. When this happens 'anything which destabilizes or hints at destabilizing a subject's fantasmatic narrative, is experienced as a threat and provokes anxiety' (Glynos quoted in Eberle 2016: 64). Put differently, the problem is not with the fantasy but with new obstacles that emerge to prevent its realisation and that become the focus for renewed actions.

In the post-Brexit situation this has been evident where Brexit's failure to bring fulfilment has often been blamed on various obstacles that therefore need removing. For example, it has become common to blame Remainers – or Remoaners as they are frequently now referred to – for seeking to undermine and sabotage the Referendum. Thus, Theresa May has regularly spoken in populist terms of Brexit representing the 'will of the people', that 'the people have spoken'. Indeed, the idea of 'the 52%' representing the will of the people has become a common means of trying to shut down debate – as if the opinions of the 48% lack legitimacy and as if the 52% all voted for the same understanding of Brexit (Davies 2017; Wincott 2017: 685). Similarly, explicit attempts to discredit critical voices on Brexit have been made by leading Brexit campaigners, once again casting them as 'treacherous' elites and experts with

vested interests not to be trusted. This has included direct attacks on the civil service, who are depicted as deliberately trying to thwart Brexit (Watt 2018; Savage 2018), the *Daily Mail's* labelling of judges as 'enemies of the people', for ruling that Brexit needed parliamentary approval in order to be triggered, and a government whip demanding that universities disclose which lecturers were teaching about Brexit (Cohen 2018a). Even the Prime Minister has been targeted, with her former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson embracing a transgressive mode to argue that her 'Chequers deal', which would leave the UK tied to EU standards for goods, was akin to having 'wrapped a suicide vest around the British constitution' and handing the detonator to Brussels.<sup>8</sup> As Cohen (2018a) notes, the effect of such attacks is ultimately to preserve the fantasy. If Brexit 'fails', if we cannot 'have our cake and eat it', it will not be because Brexit was ultimately invested with impossible dreams, but because it was thwarted by saboteurs.

And then there is the EU, around which notable transgressive dimensions have emerged, suggesting that Brussels still wants to keep Britain enslaved as a 'vassal state' (Stewart and Mason 2018), that it interfered in the 2017 General Election (Davies 2017), and continues to seek enjoyment at the UK's expense – this latter being no better highlighted than in widespread denunciations by British politicians and media commentators of the 'disrespect' and 'mockery' entailed in Donald Tusk's (President of the European Council), posting of a picture of him offering Theresa May a piece of cake with the superimposed text: 'A piece of cake, perhaps? Sorry, no cherries'.<sup>9</sup> For his part, Nigel Farage has accused the EU of being 'unreasonable' 'bully boys'.<sup>10</sup> Thus, like immigrants who are often depicted as being simultaneously lazy and worryingly industrious, the EU also appears as both incompetent and devious at the same time, tricksters intent on either trying to derail Brexit or exact punishment, but ultimately stealing our fantasy from us.

## Conclusion

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<sup>8</sup> 'Boris Johnson compares Chequer's deal to "suicide vest"', *BBC News*, 9 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45462900>.

<sup>9</sup> Joey D'Urso and Larissa Kennelly, 'Brexit: What's behind Donald Tusk's Instagram diplomacy', *BBC News*, 21 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45599122>.

<sup>10</sup> Interviewed on the Andrew Marr Show, BBC1, Sunday 3 December 2017.

To conclude, it has been argued that a contributing factor to the outcome of the Brexit referendum was the ability of populist narratives to appeal to and cultivate existing feelings of ontological insecurity prevalent amongst large sections of the British population, and which were often connected to anxieties of 'losing home', feelings of marginalisation and powerlessness and low self-esteem. Drawing on Lacanian understandings of subjectivity it was argued that populist fantasies promised to replace these anxieties with the fulfilment of a full and stable identity. Brexit fantasies came in different forms, offering nostalgic and contradictory visions, be it of a more protectionist inward looking Britain, or of an enhanced globalised free-trading nation, but both of which drew on common emotive signifiers of regained 'control', 'sovereignty', 'nationhood' and subjectivity that resonated with desires for ontological security.

Since the referendum these promises have fallen flat and the increasing sense of anger and anxiety amongst some Leave voters has been notable. These anxieties have taken different forms. At times they have manifest in feelings of guilt and shame, or in anxieties connected to the actual meaning and likely outcome of Brexit, and where feelings of disillusionment and betrayal have become evident. And they have also been manifest in continued anxieties about the nature of 'home' and standing, though this time generally framed through national lenses. The paper has argued that none of this should surprise us as fantasies are inevitably doomed to fall short. This does not mean, though, that populist fantasies are destined to fail, since it is precisely this falling short, and the identification of obstacles responsible for this, which provides the grounds on which fantasies can be reinvigorated. Indeed, in the case of Brexit it may even be that growing disillusion with the Brexit negotiations will only further foster an environment in which populist fantasies find fertile ground.

In this respect it is evident that since the referendum the sense of polarisation between Leavers and Remainers has only heightened, with mutual securitisation generating increasingly tribal identities, reinforcing a renewed sense of certainty that stabilises emerging worldviews. Increasingly, for instance, many Brexiteers are only willing to countenance a 'hard' or 'pure' Brexit, whereas previously various compromise models were also willingly considered. Similarly, many Remainers have also rejected compromise in favour of promoting

a second ‘people’s vote’ to overturn the referendum result entirely (Mctague 2018; Cohen 2018b). While such a conflictual politics is not problematic as such – and indeed may actually be a welcome antidote to the managerial politics of much of the last twenty years (Mouffe 2005; Beckett 2018) – insofar as this may signify a wider breakdown of social trust it does raise important questions about the cohesion of the British polity when moving forward. In this respect, it is important to conclude by re-emphasising that there is nothing inherently problematic or unusual about fantasies. Indeed, this paper has argued that subjects are (almost) invariably drawn towards them, while it might also be argued that a healthy democratic politics requires fantasies that appeal to people’s emotions and desires for identification. However, when competing fantasies exclude opponents from their vision of the polity, denying their right to be heard, significant problems are likely to emerge.

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