Postscript: Brexit and working-class politics

We wrote the majority of this book in 2015. Our project was at an end by the time the nation went to the polls in June 2016 to vote on Britain's continued membership of the European Union. Roughly 52% of those who voted wanted to bring Britain's membership to an end. More than 33.5 million people voted in the referendum, and almost 17.5 million people voted to leave. Most columnists, commentators, pundits and broadcasters – and the enlightened liberals who dominate our academic institutions – were shocked by the result. They just could not understand how and why so many voters had been persuaded by the fearmongering of the Leave campaign. How could voters place their trust in Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove? These men represented the elite, and they were committed to ensuring the continued dominance of capital over human life. Couldn't people see this? How could so many voters fall for the absurd claims the elite made about the economic benefits of leaving? Didn't these voters find the Leave campaign's blatant demonisation of immigrants distasteful? Didn't they know that the EU generally benefits Britain's economy, and that a vote to leave the EU was a vote for economic uncertainty and a reduction in living standards for the majority?

The economy did indeed enter a period of crisis immediately after the result was announced. As we write these words the road ahead remains uncertain. The great fear of ongoing economic turmoil – a fear lodged permanently in the British psyche after almost 40 years of neoliberalism – now frames the pious soul-saving of those whose job it is to promote a progressive liberal worldview that seeks, but hopelessly fails, to mitigate the social,

economic, cultural and personal disasters free market capitalism has wreaked on the western world.

It quickly became clear that many of those who occupy the nation's dead and decaying deindustrialised zones had voted to leave. This prompted the beautiful souls of the metropole to begin their own process of demonisation. The atavistic white working class were too stupid to recognise their own economic best interests, and they seemed to be dedicated to the task of tearing down all the towering achievements of multiculturalism. Didn't they see the great benefits of cultural diversity? How could they not be sympathetic towards the millions of people who had left their countries of origin to journey thousands of miles in search of something better?

The nation was in the grip of a new and virulent form of racism, the liberal commentariat claimed, and regressive elements among the old white working class were its driving force. Guileless proletarians had been duped by career politicians who had played on and exacerbated an extant cultural antagonism towards the non-white population. There can be no excuses for racism. The sources, reproductive cultures and incidents of such idiotic bigotry need to be challenged at once and held to account. The white working class, quite clearly, had fallen victim to dark forces keen to stir up racism and xenophobia. A new age of stupidity and blind prejudice was beginning to emerge. Now was the time for the forces of light, civility and progress to mount a determined fightback against the forces of darkness. Every weapon available should be called on.

In the midst of this national soul-searching many headed out on to the streets to take part in impromptu demonstrations against the Brexit vote, especially in London. The initial sense of shock endured. Now, almost a month after the vote, there is still, in the broadsheet press and across the mainstream media, a palpable sense of wonder and disbelief. Why had Britain decided to act against its own best interests? What inspired this weird form of national self-flagellation? Could it all have been just a colossal mistake? Should the government ignore the majority, fudge around Article 50, and remain?

Everyone in the mainstream media's orbit seemed to have voted to remain. Those journalists whose words we read in

national newspapers, and whose voices we hear on television and radio, remain a relatively privileged occupational group, and they belong to the educated metropolitan middle class. This group, we now know, voted overwhelmingly to stay in the EU. But the contact these journalists had with the white working classes of the north and Wales was close to non-existent. They know very little about the social, political and economic realities that shaped the lives of those who voted to leave. Occasionally, a voice from the provinces, usually a man or women stopped by a TV reporter while out shopping somewhere up north, would intrude on the genteel world of broadcast media and state bluntly that they were fed up with immigration and wanted an end to it. Of course, before the referendum these isolated voices had usually been framed by a subtle narrative that sought to remind viewers – who, it was assumed were broadly liberal, educated and pragmatic – that a few numbskulls still prevailed out there in the wastelands of the north. Now, after the referendum, the liberal commentariat has discovered that there were, in fact, many millions of people out there who felt the same. The division seemed obvious: enlightened progressives versus fearful and economically illiterate white racists. The nation appeared to have been torn asunder by what had at first appeared to be a rather dull referendum about Britain's continued membership of a pan-continental union geared towards boosting economic growth and trade between neighbouring states. Somehow the referendum had managed to engage the people in the way that general elections these days appeared unable to do. How are we to make sense of it all?

The return of the silent majority

The silent majority had momentarily stirred, asserted its will, and then returned immediately to its slumber, and the liberal commentariat had to respond quickly to the unexpected result. Optimism was at a premium. All indications suggested things would get worse, and they would get worse for everybody. Someone or something needed to be identified, blamed and then thoroughly castigated. The white working class – who, generally speaking, had not benefited from a higher education

and who still appeared to be attached to a range of regressive attitudes and beliefs – were the obvious culprit.

It was clear that social class was a vital part of the story, but there were other notable aspects. The young, it transpired, had voted overwhelmingly to stay in the EU (see Elgot, 2016; Cosslett, 2016a, b). Older populations had voted to leave. The same kinds of reductive logic, absurd generalisation and bilious mischaracterisation began to appear in the comment sections of the broadsheet press. Apparently the young were forward-looking, open, better-educated and totally dedicated to multiculturalism, whereas the old were poorly educated racists who had milked the welfare system and lived through a time of historic prosperity. The older population, apparently, didn't care that from now on the younger generation would not have it so good. They were more concerned with their own prejudices than with the economic wellbeing of the young and the country at large. The best thing they could do was die off and let the young get on with the task of correcting their mistakes. Underneath this predictable rhetoric, however, a range of submerged antagonisms that had been building throughout the neoliberal epoch were beginning to surface; careful, nuanced and revealing analyses were thin on the ground.

Quickly many began to demand that the government should not act on the result. There was no constitutional reason why the government must invoke Article 50 and begin the process of leaving the EU. Stories quickly began to appear in the press suggesting that millions now regretted their decision to vote to leave. They had been conned by the Leave campaign, they didn't realise the importance of the vote, and they had failed to fully consider the economic implications of exiting the EU. Some commentators, especially those on the political right, suggested that the government should use the result to secure a better deal from the EU – especially with regard to curtailing the flow of economic migrants from mainland Europe into Britain – without leaving the union entirely. Others suggested that a general election should be called, and that enacting the Leave vote should be made central to campaigning. Stories of falling house prices, mass unemployment, tumbling share prices and 'lost generations'

were everywhere (see, for example, Fraser, 2016; Rodionova, 2016; Vale, 2016; Wearden and Fletcher, 2016).

The result of the referendum might have shocked the liberal commentariat, but it certainly didn't shock us. Anyone with any recent first-hand experience of the old working class's precarious existence and hardening attitudes must have seen this coming (see also McKenzie, 2016). We work in the university sector, and most of our colleagues across the country were convinced that the Remain campaign would win the day. Remain had the best arguments. It had the more intelligent and persuasive supporters from the fields of politics, culture and mass media. Of course, many academics are deeply and unshakeably attached to logic and rationality. They believed that the people would vote for the campaign that presented the strongest case, and the strongest case, quite clearly, belonged to Remain. It was clear that economic turmoil would result if the nation voted to leave the EU. Everyone would be worse off, and this, surely, would be the determining factor. However, 'logic' and 'rationality' are always tied to ideology. Many of our colleagues simply couldn't see the festering sores and open wounds of those sections of British society that had suffered the worst effects of neoliberal restructuring. When you have almost nothing to lose, when you can see nothing positive on the horizon, and when you're convinced that you have been betrayed and cast aside, 'logic' and 'rationality' cannot remain dominant. For many of those struggling by on low incomes after decades of EU membership and liberalism's promises, it was 'logical' to do the only thing that stood even a remote chance of substantively improving their immediate circumstances.

Academics and journalists tend to be middle class and reasonably affluent, and because people who are affluent and middle class tend to live among others who are affluent and middle class, it seemed clear to them that Remain would romp to a convincing victory. Everyone seemed to agree that remaining in the EU was clearly the best course of action. Some even hoped that the impending victory would give our political leaders a mandate to pursue greater economic and political integration with our European neighbours. For them, the vote was about embracing diversity, and making it clear that the racists at the

margins would not succeed with their divisive project. The overwhelming majority of our colleagues hate UKIP, and they hate what UKIP represents. They are happy for the nation to accept more refugees and more economic migrants, and they hope to lend their support to political movements that seek to overcome the prejudices of new anti-immigrant political groups. If everything went to plan, a positive result in the referendum could herald the dawning of a new age of multicultural vibrancy and toleration.

If only more academics had left the leafy confines of the campus – and the comfortable, friendly and sedate neighbourhoods in which they tend to live – and headed out in to the real world to meet real people and discuss with them the pressures and frustrations they face in their everyday lives, they would have seen that out there in the provinces things are trending downwards. More and more people, less 'resilient' than some believe, feel helpless, forgotten, ignored and cut adrift from the mainstream. You can afford to be reasonably positive about the future when you have a reasonable wage and an ongoing stake in civil society. The future doesn't look quite so rosy when you're plagued by debt, and when your job is insecure and poorly paid. If you don't know how you'll pay the rent next month, or how you'll afford to feed your family, optimism recedes and darker emotions come to the fore.

Anger and frustration are everywhere these days. The truth of the matter is that we don't have to look too far to find these things. Social scientists in particular should have seen this coming. Huge numbers of people want change in a system that has outlawed the very idea of change. They don't see themselves as beneficiaries of our economic and cultural systems. They feel locked out and undervalued, assailed by constant frustrations and pressures. As the years go by things appear to be getting tougher and tougher. Unable to change track, they want the track to change, to lead somewhere better. They want to put an end to the pressures they face. They feel they deserve something better. Of course, change is not offered to the people at election time. The choice between neoliberals in red ties and neoliberals in blue ties just doesn't cut it. All mainstream political parties offer more of the same. But here, with the Brexit vote, people could

sense an opportunity to display their dissatisfaction with what the country had become, and where it appeared to be going.

Ultimately, the 17.5 million people who voted to leave the EU were voting for change as such. Any change would do, because there was nothing in the question posed to the electorate that was truly positive and forward-looking. People could vote to stay in a union totally committed to the continuation of free market capitalism, the primary financial institutions of which have enforced destructive austerity policies across the continent. In particular, the EU has recently compelled southern states, especially Greece, to withdraw welfare and social services in the hope of balancing the books. The human costs of this strategy have been enormous. Alternatively, people could vote to leave. This would inevitably destabilise the economy, reduce employment and in all likelihood, without the various mechanisms of the EU to keep the rapacious corporate sector in check, usher in a new age of pure market domination. Neither outcome augured well. The referendum seemed to follow the established parameters of domesticated democratic politics by limiting voters to the opportunity to endorse the political party they disliked the least.

On balance, it appears that the British population would have been marginally better off if they had decided to stay in the EU. Most academics and journalists, and many educated Remain voters, could see this, and they voted in accordance with their own economic self-interest. Their cultural preferences also played a part. Remain voters, generally speaking, were against the racism of UKIP, and against all of the assumed prejudices of those who hoped to reduce immigration. They recognised the benefits of immigration and cultural diversity, and hoped to present an open and welcoming aspect to the rest of the civilised world. However, many of those who live in the deindustrialised zones of Wales and the north of England couldn't see any economic benefit in remaining in the EU. The country had been in the EU for some time, yet for them things had got progressively worse.

How could things get worse still? How? Many of those we spoke to worked very hard for terrible rates of pay. Their jobs were insecure and they were cut adrift from mainstream civil society. They knew that all the glittering prizes of consumer

society would in all likelihood remain out of reach. Their neighbourhoods were disorderly and unkempt, and they knew beyond doubt that if things continued on as they were, their sons and daughters would fare even worse. The economic benefits of remaining in the EU? What benefits? When would these benefits trickle down to the ordinary men and women who struggled to make ends meet? Things had been getting progressively worse for decades. The oft-discussed account of the economic benefits of remaining in the EU simply had no purchase among groups that had already experienced a significant reduction in their incomes and status. When members of these groups were told it would be easier to get a job if Britain remained in the EU, they were understandably cynical and dismissive about yet another false promise. The status quo had offered them absolutely nothing. The jobs that were available were of the very worst kind. No. They wanted out. They wanted change. They wanted something, anything, that wasn't this. They would use their vote to register their dissatisfaction, and hope against hope that life outside the EU, under the full democratic control of the British electorate with no outside interference, would provide them with something better.

All this was tied up with the thorny issue of immigration. It was assumed by many that if the country voted to leave the EU, fewer immigrants would enter the country. There is also some truth in the suggestion that some Leave voters hoped that the result would enable politicians to expel immigrants already in the country, and generally act to reduce the cultural and ethnic diversity of multicultural Britain. As we noted above, many commentators suggested that the drive to cut immigration, which we now know is quite common throughout the country, referenced a new and virulent form of postmodern racism rooted in hatred and fear. However, for us as academics this is all a little too easy. We believe that new forms of cultural enmity are on the rise. Throughout our research we witnessed this reality. There are certainly some locales in which it is now perfectly normal to hear talk of the problems caused by immigrants and, as we document throughout the book, it is Muslims who tend to bear the brunt of this.

New forms of bigotry and intolerance appear to be emerging, but why? It's easy to say that you are 'against racism'. It's easy to say that racism is wrong and that it must be opposed. However, for us it seems important to dig beneath contemporary racism in the hope of discovering where it comes from and why it takes its current form. Only when we understand what we oppose will we be in a position to challenge and overcome it. Why, at this point in our history, are so many people so keen to cut immigration? Why is there such hostility towards Muslim immigrants in particular? How have such views taken root, and what other issues might be at stake?

We believe we have offered in these pages an easily accessible account of some of most important issues, even some tentative answers to the questions they beg. We have tried to ditch as much academic obscurantism, and go straight to the heart of the matter. We have focused on the most extreme expressions of white working–class nationalism, but, we think, our analysis can also illuminate growing fear of and hostility towards otherness among the broad white working class. For many ordinary working people, growing diversity and continued inward migration is inextricably bound up with the context of their own declining fortunes. For them, migrants are first and foremost economic competitors. They make it harder to get and keep a job, and they place downward pressure on wage levels. This narrative springs from the experience of ordinary white working men and women, and it acts as a foundation for the forms of cultural enmity that develop in relation to it.

Many readers will be able to recognise that this narrative oversimplifies the economic issues at stake. However, it is the immediate experience of those struggling at the bottom that matters most. Their experience tells them that it would be easier to get and keep a job if millions of recently arrived migrants were somewhere else, and not competing in the same labour markets. Talk of the overall net economic benefits of high levels of immigration cuts no ice. People struggling by on low incomes simply don't care about the contribution of immigrant populations to the nation's GDP. Understandably enough, they see such debates as a distraction, and a way of avoiding any discussion of the impact immigration has had on particular labour

markets and particular locales. Macro-level analysis doesn't tell us much about how things play out at a local level, or about rising levels of competition in the local labour markets in which recently arrived migrants tend to cluster. If you're forced to compete against recently arrived migrants for low-paid and insecure jobs in the manual trades or the lower echelons of the service sector, it's difficult to set aside your personal troubles and cling on to the abstract calculations, often discussed in newspapers and on TV news broadcasts, that suggest immigrants make a significant overall contribution to the nation's economy.

So, we do not deny that racism among the white working class is growing. However, as social scientists, we began this project in the hope of uncovering the forces that appear to be driving this trend. For us it is not enough to simply repeat over and over again that we are against racism, and that people who express racist beliefs are bad and need to change. We are dedicated to the discovery of what's going on out there in the real world.

Why the left must change

The racism of today is a post-imperial racism rooted in global political economy and the absolute decline of traditional working-class work, security and status in the west. This is not simply the traditional racism that was primarily a product of imperialist colonial ideology. Where that was a racism of imaginary superiority, this is a racism of imagined inferiority that each day passes an affirming reality test. There are cultural issues at stake, but these develop in relation to this central economic issue. The sense of community dissolution and the gradual disappearance of the traditional culture are important, and they are experienced as such by millions of ordinary men and women across the country. It doesn't help at all when these processes are dismissed as irrelevant by academics and commentators who tell the working class to get over themselves, catch up with the rest of us, accept the cold and ahistorical world of western consumer culture, and eke out a new position of safety in the unforgiving global economy. More and more people today feel lost, rootless and set apart from the world. We know this. It's part of the way we live today. The solidity, security and continuity of traditional

cultural life has disappeared. More and more people feel history leaving them behind. In the absence of a substantive political project capable of connecting these issues to their true cause – and amid the systematic silencing of any public talk about the possibility of such a project – these people look around for someone or something to blame.

There once existed a functional and committed left that sought to connect the economic and cultural frustrations of the multiethnic working class to their true cause. The mainstream political left today shows absolutely no desire to do this. It shows no desire to actually intervene in any effective way in the world in order to address the frustrations and pressures that blight so many working-class lives. The left today appears to believe that the very best it can hope for is to mitigate some of capitalism's worst effects by persuading government ministers to adopt new policy interventions geared towards removing blockages in the system as it presently exists. The virtual disappearance of a strident left willing to affect genuine change has altered the entire political spectrum. The anchor that held the entire system in place has been withdrawn, and as a result our political system has drifted gradually to the right. Liberalism has won. Socialism and one-nation conservatism are, at least for the moment, dead. The liberal left argues with the liberal right about the extent to which the government should tax individuals and corporations, but these arguments inevitably strike the precarious working class as sterile and forced because, ultimately, the liberal left agrees with the liberal right on everything bar the small details. Both groups speak with one voice on all issues related to global political economy, and it is only on the field of political economy that politicians can affect genuine structural change. Ultimately, our political system has been eroded, truncated and deprived of the substance it once had, and the workaday politics of Westminster appears stage-managed and bereft of the energy and innovation that might set us on a different course.

We have argued at some length that the exhaustion and decrepitude of the left today is the principal reason why so many of the white working class are moving to the right. The rise of the right is inextricably connected to the decline of the left. It is now time for the left to begin a thorough political

and intellectual stock-check. The left must be honest enough to acknowledge the mistakes that have been made, and it must work tirelessly to reattach itself to its roots in the working class. If the left can't do this – if it remains lost in identity politics and dominated by right-on metropolitan liberals who appear totally unwilling to intervene in the economy to improve the fortunes of the working class – we will continue to drift gradually and inevitably into an era dominated by the political right.