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## 'It's not ideal': reconsidering 'anger' and 'apathy' in the Brexit vote among an invisible working class

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## **'It's not ideal': Reconsidering 'anger' and 'apathy' in the Brexit vote among an invisible working class**

### **Abstract**

Media commentary has characterized the working class 'leave' voters in the UK's EU referendum in terms of anger, apathy and frustration. There have been very few genuine attempts to document and interpret the meaning of the 'leave' vote among underprivileged voters who seemed to have voted for an outcome that harms their own interests. This paper explores accounts and narratives from working class 'leave' voters through an ethnographic study of the political and social viewpoints of working class communities of East London, and of ex-mining towns of Nottinghamshire. The paper puts into fuller context the anger and apathy of being 'left out', arguing that being 'left out' has been part of working class political narratives for over 30 years. Going beyond frustration and apathy, a significant part of the narrative of working people was of 'not existing', suggesting certain important linkages with ongoing debates about new ways of conceptualizing class differences and class structures. The paper shows how macro-stage political events such as a referendum about Europe can often be usefully illuminated by taking seriously the micro experiences on the ground.

### **Introduction**

Its mid-June in 2016 and I am sat in a local café in East London with one of the women who has been part of my ethnographic research for the previous two years. Sally<sup>1</sup> is 29 and has two small children. Both attend a local school in the area and they have lived in this part of East London all of their lives. The school that Sally's children attend was not her first choice and she was disappointed that two months earlier on National Offer Day both of her children had not been 'chosen' to go to their first choice. She was 'fed up' and had called me to ask for 'advice', even though I didn't know much about the local school situation. I was an ear, and was sympathetic. Sally told me that she felt responsible for her children not getting into her first choice school, and she mused over what she might have done or said differently. Eventually she turned to me and said 'It's not ideal but I'll make it work'. I had met Sally in 2014 and interviewed her about her housing situation; she was living in a hostel and was waiting to be housed, indeed we first met in the local council's 'one stop shop'. I was there waiting to sort out problems with my council tax, and Sally was trying to persuade one of the housing officials to help her get out of the hostel. That day she was very upset, and I sat with her while she waited to hear whether or not she was going to be 'proper homeless'. Although officially she had 'homeless status' living at the hostel she had resigned herself to it, rationalizing this with the explanation that it 'wasn't ideal but we aren't out on the street yet'.

By 2015 Sally had decided to move back into her mother's one-bedroom flat with both of her children. Again she told me that 'it wasn't ideal' but was better than moving 30 miles away from her family, and friends. The council had eventually offered her a private rented flat in Essex and she didn't want to go. Moving out of the area with two young small children would be difficult and she also didn't want to move into private rented accommodation. Sally's aim was to go back to work as soon

as her youngest child started full-time school and she was worried she would be left responsible with a monthly rent of over £1,000.

This ethnographic vignette taken from my research diary may initially appear unrelated to the overall debate in this special issue on the referendum on the United Kingdom's position on either leaving the European Union or remaining a member. However, for Sally and for the other women that had become part of my ethnographic research, the issues she refers to above were to be central themes around which they discussed the referendum, and their political understanding of their own social lives.

The 52% vote to leave has generated a lot hand-wringing within academic, media and political circles. How did the experts, media, politicians and business leaders misjudge the public mood so badly? Why did so many underprivileged people vote for a Brexit that surely won't help their own economic conditions? The surprise and disappointment of the result has been accompanied by a tone of anger and indignation, particularly in trying to find 'blame' as to whose fault it was that this seemingly tragic and self-defeating decision had been taken, especially by working class voters.

This paper focuses upon people who voted 'Leave' or those who did not vote at all, providing much-needed detail and context in describing a cycle of anger to apathy and back again for a group of men and women in East London and another group in the former mining communities of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Both of these groups live on low incomes below the national average wage, either because they are low-paid, unemployed, or working in precarious conditions (Findlay and Thompson, 2017; Standing 2014). I have been undertaking an ethnographic study in East London over 3 years, and the general election in 2015 and the European Referendum in 2016 provided deep and important insights into urban working class community in a 'global' city. The group in the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire ex-mining towns, I have been working with since July 2017 and my discussions with them have taken place after the 2016 Brexit vote. This group also broadly voted to 'Leave'. While the population of London was one of the few areas of England that voted strongly to 'Remain' it is instructive to explore the standpoints of London 'Leave' voters. It is also enlightening to contrast the views of these Londoners to those of the midlands towns in my study, because of the seemingly obvious and opposing geographical contexts to their lives. One group lives in a 'global', cosmopolitan, multicultural city with great wealth and located at the centre of the country's (and to a significant extent Europe's) financial economy. The other group live in small, isolated communities that have been devastated by de-industrialisation and where Government funded-support is essential on every level. What I found is that the similarities in their reasoning around the referendum was overwhelming despite their different geographies and varied community identities. Significant commonalities existed in the ways in which both groups critically understood their social positions and the social positions of others. What emerged was a shared class anger and a shared reading of their unfair and unequal social positions. Pro-Remain discourses simply made no sense to them as they were fundamentally dissociated from such reasoning on any economic, political, or emotional level.

This short article progresses in the following fashion. Firstly it provides a short introduction to the ethnographic methodology of the paper and the broader conceptual frames that informed my investigations, namely the sociology of class and community. The paper then develops the East London element of the ethnography, drawing out the narratives, standpoints, and rhetorical positions of my group of London Leavers. It then moves on to explore the Midlands Leavers, illuminating the similar discourses around disillusionment, and of powerful forms of localism and community, a processes that necessarily includes elements of 'othering' that reject national and EU elite positions as demeaning and irrelevant. What I argue is that the marginalization of these groups is so significant that their democratic rejection of the UK's membership of the EU is entirely understandable. Dismissing such a view as 'irrational' or 'xenophobic' betrays a lack of sociological understanding of the long-term progression of narratives and markers that class as a social formation over several decades (see for example, Bourdieu, 1977; Skeggs, 2000, 2004). Elites in the political classes as well as middle class 'cosmopolitans' now seem to have lost any sensible way to interpret such narratives and markers without recourse to demonizing and sermonizing, defaulting to corrosive narratives about a 'feckless poor' that recalls Victorian-era poverty discourses (Savage et al, 2015: 352).

### **Researching Marginalized Communities: The Methods and Theory of the Study**

Since 2004 I have been researching marginalized working-class communities in East London and Nottinghamshire (Mckenzie 2012, 2013a, 2013b). The main body of the work was published as *Getting By* (Mckenzie, 2015). In recent years I have also contributed to the multi-methods class analysis carried out by Mike Savage and colleagues (Savage, 2015). Methodologically, my work has been qualitative in orientation, using a range of approaches to uncover and discuss the viewpoints, stories and narratives of working people as they account for and consider their own social positions. Some of the qualitative data are derived from unstructured interviews, whereas others – drawing on an ethnographic tradition of community studies – are developed out of my own fieldwork diaries. The diaries were written up into fuller accounts based on original scratch notes taken during and shortly periods of time meeting, talking, and getting to know my research participants over several years (Brunt, 2001; Wolcott, 2001). The latter approach was informed by the very rich tradition of immersive fieldwork inside the communities in question (see for example Cornwell, 1984; Skeggs, 2000; Young and Willmott, 1962; Willis, 1977). This was not a quest for objective 'truths' or 'laws' but an explorative based to large extent of the value of 'being there', gathering insights and sharing them with the community themselves, getting a sense of and in some sense sharing in what Bourdieu might have called the 'habitus' of these communities. Overall, the purpose of the observations, fieldnotes, diaries and interviews were to gather and generate new text about the contested nature of social class: to see how the local people of these communities understood and discussed central sociological issues associated with class such as opportunity, work, housing, wealth, status, and political representation. Such notions have featured regularly, but very superficially, in the media

future surrounding the unexpected Brexit results and my paper aims to offer a more sociologically-detailed account of themes.

Conceptually, my work is informed by ongoing debates in the sociology of class and social distinction, that date back at least to Bourdieu's pioneering work on cultural capital, through to more recent British work on changing class formations, see for example, Reay, 1998, 2005, 2007; Savage et al, 2015; Skeggs, 2000; 2004). Much of this literature describes the traditional markers of class (e.g. educational level, occupation, wages) as only ever partially accurate in explaining and accounting for socially-constructed formations such as class. Influenced in large part by the sociology of Bourdieu, class is seen also as cultural as well as economic or occupational, and class (like other social constructions such as gender) is best conceptualized as a dynamic or a process rather than a given (Savage et al, 2015; Hebson, 2009; Reay, 1998, 2005, 2007; Skeggs, 2000, 2004). However, it would be remiss to neglect to mention the crucial role played by economic isolation; patterns of class exclusion are a combination of many factors: economic, cultural, social, ethnic and identitarian. The people who participated in my study, like others in similarly excluded positions (see Skeggs 2000, Willis, 1977) could only 'trade' in social and cultural capital that had very little worth beyond the bounds of their own local communities. Repeated across the UK, when coupled with the share of the Leave vote constituted by middle class conservative voters predominantly located in rural regions, the sum total of the leave-voting 'locals' was enough to outnumber the 'cosmopolitan' 'Remainers'; typically these Remainers are middle-class, urban, white-collar professions and who possess economic, social and cultural capital of much broader value. The cosmopolitan middle class reaction of shock and disappointment as regards working-class Brexit voting patterns risks contributing to narratives of a 'feckless poor' that will only exacerbate further social exclusion.

In what follows, I try to connect the policy discussion of how and why the Brexit position manifested itself in impoverished communities, with an ethnographic discussion of my qualitative data from interview and from my own fieldwork diaries. I note that these narratives and accounts are not fixed or stable, but should also be thought of as social constructions that either build on or disrupt ongoing narratives at play in broader society. In thinking about discourses of Brexit voting in this way, we give voice to narratives that are often unpalatable, excluded, demonized or poorly-understood.

### **East London: An[other] Minority**

Sally (introduced above) had over time introduced me to other women that were living in the area. I had first met and interviewed them as we were entering an election year. Between 2010 and 2015 the UK had been governed by a coalition of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrat Party. This government had implemented increasingly severe austerity policies since the banking crash of 2008 (see, for fuller discussion, Morris L. 2016, Hills J. 2015). In 2015 the Conservative Party stood on a manifesto that included another 12 billion pounds of savings from welfare services, on top of the prior five years of austerity budgets. Leading policy scholars were at this time exploring the impact government policies

had been having on inequality and on the delivery of services such as health, education, adult social care, housing and employment since the 2008 recession. Their research showed clearly that:

‘The biggest losers among ‘non-protected’ services were those provided by local councils. Between 2009/10 and 2014/15, local government funding in England fell by an estimated 33 per cent. Within particular service areas, spending on children aged under five fell 21 per cent between 2009-10 and 2012-13, with falls of 11 per cent for early education and 32 per cent for Sure Start’ (Lupton et al. 2016).

This important research also showed that spending on housing and community amenities, including the funding to build social housing, also fell by 35 per cent. At the same time all the main central government funding streams for neighbourhood renewal were removed (Lupton et al, 2016). Those most in need of social goods and services, the poorest in our society were at the coal face of the austerity measures and the mantra of the Conservative Party of ‘We are all in this together’ was simply untrue. Despite this the general election of May 2015 returned a Conservative Party majority Government for the first time since 1992 (Mckenzie L. 2017, 2016), due in large part to the continued weakness of a Labour Party that had been steadily losing support among its core voting demographic since the last years of the Tony Blair government of 1997-2007. During the election campaign in 2015 I interviewed the women in East London as the pre-election televised debates were taking place. As befits their economically and socially marginalized position, they showed little to no interest in these debates and in the election campaign in general. None of the women at this point intended to vote in the general election.

Anne works in a small local shop and is in her sixties. She describes herself 'as a proper Eastender' and would normally vote for the Labour Party. This year Anne says she ‘wasn’t going to bother’; she didn’t like the leader of the Labour Party (Ed Miliband) and thought he was ‘useless’. She also suggested that the national political situation had little connection with the local politics in the borough. This part of East London has a complicated and complex political history, and at the time of the 2015 Election was in the process of removing the Mayor from the Borough who had been found to have committed electoral fraud (Quinn et al, 2015). The Borough was home to some of the poorest people in London, yet at the same time was home to major international banking professionals and executives. Wealth inequality in this part of London sits very obviously side-by-side. Deprived council estates are yards from the corporate offices and high-end apartment complexes of the global elite. Yet despite the obvious inequality, my laboured conversations with the group of women in East London about the political situation were not straightforward during the 2015 election campaign. Take the following interchange for example, which shows my research participants’ reluctance to associate themselves with mainstream political processes:

*Lisa “Are you worried about what might happen after the election? That things might get even worse with all the cuts that’s coming”*

*Anne “Worse than what? Worse than now?! I’m not sure it can get any worse can it?”*

Lisa *“Well, things can always get worse, can’t they?”*

Anne *“You are in a good mood today, Lisa, aren’t you? I could have stayed at home and listened to the news if I wanted to be depressed.”*

Sally *“I’m not worried. I’m sick of worrying. I’m worrying about where I’m going to live next year and I can’t be worried about this on top of everything else... they [politicians] aren’t worried about me”*

Anne *“There’s no point anyway in worrying, we can’t change anything...they don’t listen to us and especially round here...if you aren’t with the Brotherhood and Sisterhood you don’t count”*

While the general tone of political disengagement would be common in many economically deprived communities, the comments about the local specifics were quite idiosyncratic. Anne uses the terms 'Brotherhood and Sisterhood' as reference to the recently removed Mayor and his independent political party that was seen by many in the area to represent only a minority of people within the Bangladeshi community and connected to the distinctly ethnically connected kinship networks. The men and women that had been part of my research were not a part of this community. Comments such as these hint at a broader discourse about the exclusion of 'traditional' white working class communities; the kind of discourse that the UK Independence Party has thrived on. When I tried to explore such matters in more detail, these conversations were mostly cut short, and were answered in response to my questions about voting in general. The women prioritised the politics that directly affected them and their families, such as the lack of housing, the shortage of places in local schools, and the inadequacies of local health service provision. The larger issue of the 2015 general election was simply not a priority. The women in this community felt estranged from national politics despite living only three miles away from Westminster and Parliament.

During this time I had also been meeting a group of men from the area. They varied in age, but most of them worked in the building trades: painters and decorators, pipe fitters, asbestos removal. Commonly they were employed as sub-contractors meaning they were self-employed and much of their work was gained through 'word of mouth' in their local networks. These men were equally uninterested in the 2015 general election although some of the men did say they intended to vote although wouldn't tell me which party they would vote for. Two of the younger men in their early thirties were happier to tell me that they planned to vote for UKIP:

Lisa 'Are you going to vote next month?'

Brian 'No I've never voted but if I was going to vote I would vote UKIP'

Jason 'Yeah, I'd vote UKIP if I was going to vote'

Lisa 'So are you going to vote?'

Brian 'No (laughing)! Round here? You're having a laugh!'

Both Brian and Jason's employment status was precarious. Brian was a 'subbie' (sub-contracted) painter and decorator and Jason would work odd days 'here and there' with 'his mate' on building sites. Similarly to the women the men did not see a direct connection between themselves, their political and social position and the general election. Brian's last comment about the political situation 'round here' was referring to the same point that 'Anne' had made earlier about feeling excluded from local politics. Although there was a lot of talk in the pub about 'voting UKIP' during the 2015 election the men admitted to me afterwards they hadn't voted at all.

However, in comparison to their disaffection and non-participation towards the general election, my research participants seemed much more involved in the June 2016 EU referendum. They appeared to be considerably more animated as regards the referendum, often describing it as an event that gave them the ability to express their opinions in ways that the general election hadn't allowed. There was a clear line of argument that here was an opportunity to push back against the expectations of the privileged elites as can be seen in the following excerpt from my research fieldnotes:

I'm sat with Sally, Anne, and one of Anne's work colleagues from the shop, a woman in her early 20s named Sarah and a mother to a three-year-old daughter. It's two weeks before the referendum and the three women are talking about the extended deadline in the registration system. Sally and Sarah had not registered. However both were planning to register today, and all three women were going to vote to leave the EU. Their discussion focussed on their being motivated to do this by the news that David Beckham was apparently urging people to vote remain, and they felt that this was 'a liberty':

Anne 'That fucking David Beckham can fuck right off, telling people to vote Remain'

Sarah 'What does he know about anything? When has he had to struggle to get his kids into school?'

Sally 'Yeah, him and Posh got no housing problems, apart from which one are they going to live in!'

Sally and Sarah both registered their right to vote in the referendum that day, and later told me that they were excited about 'getting their say'. Compared to their apathy towards the general election of 2015 I was struck by their enthusiasm. This was infectious; as other people came into the café the conversation got bigger and louder with more people joining in. One man came into the café laughing and joking, saying 'his wife would kill him that he was 'voting out' because she was French'. Sarah said her Dad was Spanish but had lived in the East End for 30 years and he was also voting out. I told them I was going to write an article about all of this in a National newspaper, they said 'I better tell them how it is'.



Writing about my research in media outlets created some of the interesting dynamics and dilemmas that often emerge out of ethnographic work (see Skeggs, 2000: 28-31). Certainly I was keen to report my research participants' views faithfully in the article, but it also meant that any extended comment or interpretation of what these views might mean was rendered difficult, for fear of betraying or misrepresenting my research informants that I had come to know over several months and years.

I saw the women a week later, the day before the referendum, and they had all read the article I had written in *The Guardian* newspaper (Mckenzie, 2016). They congratulated me in 'telling the truth' and 'telling them how it really is.' None of the women had read *The Guardian* before, which is hardly surprising given its middle class Labour and pro-EU sensibilities. I had shared the article on my social media sites, and I felt a strong desire that they would read it. Their reactions to the online comments posted beneath the article were instructive. They were hurt by the reaction of many *Guardian* readers and others, some of which had accused those planning to vote to leave as 'bigots', 'backwards' and 'racists.' The comments had hurt them. They didn't think they were any of these things and they often commented that 'race' was not part of this referendum. From their standpoint, the decision to vote leave was a way to kick back at an establishment that they felt let down by. Anne was really upset by the accusations of racism, saying 'I have lived in the East End for 60 years. If I was a racist I wouldn't live here'. What followed was a powerful vignette that spoke to broader discussions of a new form of social exclusion for certain white working class communities:

Sally said, in relation to the *Guardian* social media commentators: 'We don't exist to them do we?' Anne looked at Sally and said 'well that's a shame for them because all us fuckers who don't exist are voting out tomorrow'.

I went to see the women the day after the referendum. They were overjoyed with the result and were talking excitedly how they felt when each area in the north of England started to declare they had voted to leave. They were 'grateful' to 'the northerners', and at least for that one day they felt they had won something. Their anger and frustration of being ignored and overlooked became legitimised in their right and power to vote 'leave' when they knew that most politicians, mainstream media outlets, and the wider middle class electorate wanted to 'remain'.

### **Post-Brexit and Post-Industrialisation**

Soon after the referendum I began a small research project in two of the many ex-mining towns on the Nottinghamshire/Derbyshire border, in England's East Midlands. These were small towns and pit villages that had been left in a state of devastation since the mining industry was closed during the early 1990s. Other forms of de-industrialisation soon followed as the textile industries also began to close. The area had also been the site of large scale manufacturing, especially in the form of hosiery and other clothing manufacturing industries that employed a large female workforce for several generations. Thousands of women in the area had been employed in the hosiery and textile industries

until they too closed during the mid-1990s, when companies turned to low-cost overseas supply chains.

Despite over 30 years of de-industrialisation, these communities are still made up of those families who have lived there for generations, with little mobility moving in or out. Consequently census data suggest that 97-99% of the population identify as White British, in comparison to 80.5% as the national average (ONS, 2012) and around 92.6% as the regional average (Nottinghamshire JSNA, 2016). 2011 Census data for East London boroughs such as Newham and Tower Hamlets indicate that their populations comprise around 16-30% White British (ONS, 2012). Economic and social well-being indicators for these regions of the East Midlands are well below the UK average, with nearly a third of all children in the region officially classed as living in poverty. The official long term unemployment rate of only 6% suggests widespread under-employment and poverty-level wages (Nottinghamshire County Council 2016). Newer warehouse and distribution centres started to appear in the region in the 2000s, but these jobs were deskilled and poorly paid in relation to the mining and clothing jobs that had been lost. The work does not go beyond 'warehouse picking': low skilled, low paid, no career ladder, and often on very poor employment conditions such as zero-hours contracts. This type of employment may have 'made up numbers' in regards to the employment figures, but economically, socially, and politically they offer very little to the thousands of people that work within them. It has been well documented that the strength of the old manufacturing and mining communities was their sense of the 'collective' or solidarity, whether that was through working identities, gender identities, or through institutions like local party politics, churches, and trade union affiliation. Usually all of these elements were intertwined. This sense of collectivism, class pride and stability that had long and hard-fought histories in this area had been hollowed out along with the manufacturing industries themselves, and it was precisely this absence of solidarity that had made this area change from a Labour and union stronghold to an area with much less clear political leanings

I spoke to two groups; women that had once worked in the clothing industries, and men that had worked in mining. Their interviews and focus groups often reflected a deep sense of sadness and loss. The tone was not quite the same as that of the anger and resentment that had often been prominent among the Londoners. Despite the overwhelming vote to 'leave' that emerged in the area's voting pattern in the referendum, the people here were not optimistic or celebratory about the prospects, processes or outcomes of voting leaving. They, too, were confused and hurt by what they were reading and hearing about what was being said about them and 'people like them' in the media and social media. Understandably, they didn't like been called 'stupid' and 'turkeys voting for Christmas'. They didn't understand why, as one ex-miner in his seventies told me, 'Remainers' would label him 'a racist.' He was certain that he was not a 'racist', suggesting that he didn't really know anyone that had come from 'somewhere else' and he had voted to leave the European Union because he had watched the community where his family had lived for generations being devastated. He was worried that his grandchildren were going to leave the area, and he had seen his adult children taking out 'payday loans' because they were struggling so badly. Both men and women of all generations shared similar fears and worries about the amount of warehouses opening in the area paying very low wages and offering only zero hours contracts. The 'public accounts' (Cornwell, 1984) of these communities did not circulate around race or migration, but were much more to do with feeling abandoned,

struggling financially, and feeling totally remote from mainstream political parties. It is interesting to reflect on how the Labour Party, that is supposed to represent working class communities, has failed so badly in this regard, and how Labour MPs hedged their bets on Brexit by failing to articulate a strong argument to remain, partly because they knew the EU was unpopular among many working class communities.

### **'Left Out': The Other Other**

The general political comment around the working class vote to leave the European Union Since June 2016 has been predominantly that of 'the left behind'. This view has been articulated across the political spectrum, even by the new Prime Minister Theresa May. The week following the referendum there were thousands of column inches of opinion and commentary. A phrase that has kept appearing since in relation to working class 'leavers' was 'left behind'. Jonathan Freedland in 'The New European' a newspaper that claims to represent 'the 48%' of voters that wanted to remain in the EU described 'the left behind' as those:

'In seats that were traditionally held by Labour, in some of the run-down, hard-up towns of northern England and Wales' (Freedland, 2016)

*The Guardian's* line on this tended to focus upon the 'older left-behind' working class voters, who had been unhappy about:

'The mass migration from poorer EU countries that began in 2004 was something the "left-behind" electorate never wanted, never voted for and never really accepted' (*The Guardian* Editorial 25/6/16)

While there is clearly some truth in this position, the 'left behind' rhetoric is somewhat simplistic. I would argue that the 'left behind' rhetoric is incorrect and disingenuous when one considers the depth and intensity of what has happened to working class people, their communities, and their identities for over 30 years. By the mid 1980's and especially as the mines, the docks, and the factories closed, there has been a shifting process about how working class people in the UK are known and named, and in particular a growing problematization of the 'white working class'. Although all working class people have seen their incomes fall, and the weakening of opportunities for their children to get on the housing ladder, find well-paid jobs, and enter into higher education, it is the 'white working class' that has become named and known as not only economically impoverished but also culturally impoverished, represented as 'excess and nothing, in the sense of having and being of no value' (Reay, 2007: 1049). Chris Haylett, (2000) a social geographer, wrote very perceptively almost twenty years ago that the white working class had become an embarrassing contradiction, by losing the symbolic status their colour and their class had awarded in the past and have become 'abject and white'.

With this in mind, the patronising 'left behind' rhetoric actively supports this de-valued identity of the de-industrialised working class. Rather than focus on and attempt to genuinely understand the structural nature of de-industrialisation, of class inequality, and of class prejudice, the 'left behind' rhetoric relies on the stereotypes and prejudices that the poor white working class are 'old fashioned', un-modern, have no mobility, and long for the past. Working class Brexit voters have borne the brunt of the commentariat's backlash,

despite the reality that there was a larger middle class Brexit vote (Dorling, 2016). As the economy booms and busts, and as housing bubbles become inflated in the South East, middle class parents can use their previously-collected capital (cultural, social and economic) to weather the storms. Whether Britain stays in Europe or gets out, working class parents like Sally in London, or the men and women in the mining towns have nothing in their immediate history to draw upon and no economic or social capital to trade.

## **Conclusion**

For a brief moment in June 2016 the apathy of the British working class electorate subsided and gave way to a howl of anger, revealing the frustration of those who had been left out of successes and rewards that capitalism had created for a cosmopolitan middle class in parts of the United Kingdom. The reluctance to engage in national politics that I had witnessed during the 2015 general election had been put aside by June 2016 by the working class people in my research, in order to spoil the party they had never been invited to. The women in my research had believed in 2015 that they were being ignored and 'didn't matter'. They used their experiences of class struggle, the struggle everyday they had in order to 'pull themselves together' from their precarious lives and to try to keep going even though 'it's not ideal'.

The people who had taken part in my research and had voted to leave the European Union did so not because they thought their lives would be better if Britain was not in the EU. They did so, as Sally had said, because they just couldn't stand it being the same. It is certainly unlikely that Britain leaving the UK will have any obvious positive effects for Britain's disenfranchised urban and regional poor. So in some sense underprivileged people voting for Brexit does harm their interests. But it is also very reasonable to doubt that remaining in the EU does much for these people, either. The EU project, although responsible for the implementation of some important policies in Britain such as minimum wage and employment relations legislation, is broadly about the expansion of neoliberal globalization, a broad set of processes that have been broadly a disaster for underprivileged communities across much of the world (Perrucci and Perrucci, 2009). Perhaps, therefore, the 'tragedy' here is not Britain's poor voting for Brexit, but more to do with the utter collapse of any broader vision of working class solidarity that might genuinely do something to alleviate the vulnerability and isolation of the thousands of poor communities that struggle to make ends meet across the worlds of global capitalism.

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<sup>i</sup> To protect the privacy of research participants, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.