Brexit and the politics of the rural[i]

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Abstract

This paper uses Woods' (2005) term 'politics of the rural' as a lens to trace connections between 'Brexit' and countryside protests that erupted in the late 1990s following the disruption of a century old political settlement for governing rural areas. Historically, the intertwining of rurality, hierarchy and empire in national identity has shielded rural elite interests and the power structures that uphold them from progressive political developments in urban areas. The paper highlights how a new political party, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), was able to occupy a space opened by Countryside Alliance, and subsequently vacated by a modernising Conservative Party, to build a movement shaped by a similar type of settler populism. How these broader dynamics interacted with local contexts to structure perceptions and experiences underpinning support for Brexit calls for more contextualised, region-specific research. 'Politics of the rural' provides one lens among others to bring to these analyses.

Keywords

Brexit, Ethnic populism, Conservatism, English countryside, Countryside Alliance, Politics of the rural

Introduction

On 23 June 2016, the UK voted narrowly to exit the European Union by 51.9–48.1 per cent. The vote was equally divided between the UK nations[1], with majorities in favour of exiting the EU in England and Wales[2], and in favour of remaining in the EU in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, with 84 per cent of the UK population residing in England, the English vote of 53.4-46.6 per cent in favour of Leave was decisive in this rare instance of proportional voting for a population accustomed to a first-past-the-post system.

In rural England, the result was more decisive, at 55-45 per cent in favour of exiting the EU[3] (Country Land and Business Association n.d.). Popular debate about the rural contribution to the Brexit result among a majority urban populace has been limited, and largely based on an

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outdated picture of rural England as an unchanging agrarian-based economy and society. Moreover, a narrow focus on unearthing the reasons particular groups voted in the way they did oversimplifies more complex realities of rural life and overstates the significance of an ill-defined rural vote. At the same time, such a focus underplays more fundamental ways in which rural imaginaries mediated wider engagement with the promises of the Leave campaign. The core argument of this paper is that it is at this deeper level that a 'politics of the rural' (Woods 2005) that merged a national identity rooted in imagery of rural England with ethnic populism helped to underpin broader societal support for Brexit.

In his analysis of reactionary populism in Britain and the US, Beckett (2016) argued that "power has leaked to the countryside". This paper takes this argument as an entry point to discuss changes in rural England that created conditions of possibility for Brexit. Rather than focusing on *explaining* 'the rural vote' for Brexit, the paper examines the societal support for exiting the EU through a "politics of the rural" lens (Woods 2005). Drawing on a range of documentary sources, including reports, web materials, newspaper articles and peer reviewed articles, this paper explores the evolution of a countryside protest movement that emerged in the late 1990s in response to changes to rural life whose significance Woods (2005) has compared to the enclosures of 18th and 19th centuries. These movements were, paradoxically, both a reactionary spasm of an established order seeking to maintain control and an expression of anti-state sentiment (cf. Ashwood 2018). These are recognisable elements of what Schwarz (2011) terms ethnic populism, a phenomenon he associates with the slow contraction of the English nation as a former seat of imperial power, in which its self-appointed defenders challenged the legitimacy of a British state perceived as captured by 'foreign' interests.

This paper is organised as follows. The next section interrogates the main narratives that have been called upon to explain the Brexit result, questioning the possibility of defining a singular 'rural vote' for Brexit. This is followed by a discussion of the, often unconscious, intertwining of rurality, hierarchy and empire in English (projected to British) identity that has persisted due to an urban-rural firewall protecting rural social structures from progressive urban-based politics. The subsequent two sections explore developments in contemporary rural politics that destabilised this long-standing political settlement. They focus on a series of countryside protests that took place at the end of the 'long 1990s' in response to a 'crisis of representation' as the political party with which rural elites most identified was politically marginalised; coinciding with a period of major social and economic change in the countryside (Ward 2002).

The final section explores links between these protests and the momentum that built towards an in/out referendum on EU membership. It identifies the role of a new political party, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), in occupying a space opened up by Countryside Alliance, and then vacated by a modernising Conservative Party, as a bridge between the two eras, each characterised by a form of settler populism of the kind that developed in white enclaves of empire. Rather than seek explanations based on generic categories like 'the left behind' and 'the rural vote', this paper concludes by stressing the need for contextualised, region-specific analyses of how these broader societal factors intersected with local specificities to structure perceptions and experiences underpinning support for Brexit. 'Politics of the rural' is one lens among others that can contribute to more nuanced, region-specific analyses.

'Farmers voted for Brexit' and other stories – (mis)understanding the Leave vote

Since the shock referendum result of June 2016, there have been several attempts to construct narratives to explain it. Two narratives have dominated. The first, favoured by the political left, argues that the result was "delivered by the 'left behind' ... low skilled and less well-educated blue-collar workers and citizens who have been pushed to the margins" (Goodwin and Heath, 2016:13). This narrative centres on a 'white working class' figure, implicitly male, and un- or underemployed as a result of post-industrial decline (see Bhambra, 2017 for a critique). A narrative preferred by the political right and centre right emphasises cultural factors. Goodhart (2017) identifies a key fault line as between: 'Somewheres' – rooted in places, often small towns or villages, socially conservative and less well-educated, and nostalgic for the past, who tended to vote Leave; and 'Anywheres' – urban, cosmopolitan, socially liberal and university educated, who voted to Remain[4]. Beckett (2016) concurs with Goodhart's framing to an extent but draws the line differently. A lesson from both the Brexit vote and election of President Trump in the US, he argues, is that, while *cultural* power may lie in large cities, with their "over-committed, transient populations" metropolitan centres are "politically weak". Political power, he concludes, has "leaked to the countryside" and smaller towns, and to people who are older, racially white and less busy, be they country pensioners or underemployed workers.

A more pertinent question, therefore, is how a campaign to leave the EU managed to "cohere a significant cross-class coalition" of middle-aged and older voters (Virdee and McGeever 2018, p. 1803). This brings us to a third narrative, which locates the appeal of Brexit, and in particular the anti-immigration messages employed by the Leave campaigns, in suppressed

nostalgia for empire and attachment to a myth that Britain 'stood alone' against European fascism in the Second World War. Within this world view, most common among people identifying as English (rather than British), the idea of compromise – so central to the EU project – is understood as subordination. Indeed, unlike other forms of nationalism within the UK[5], alignment with Euroscepticism is a particular feature of *English* nationalism (Barnett 2017; O'Toole 2019; Virdee and McGeever 2018).

While each of these narratives has its champions, more nuanced readings of factors contributing to the referendum outcome in particular places have been more elusive. Similarly, coverage of 'the rural vote' for Brexit has tended to reflect stereotypes, held by the majority urban population, of rural people, often conflated with 'farmers', as either apolitical and uninformed, or conservative and reactionary. Such views are based on a series of misconceptions: of the changing composition and dynamics of the agricultural sector, of the structure of rural society, and of nuances of the vote itself. Taking these in order, let us first interrogate the oft-repeated conclusion that 'farmers voted for Brexit'.

Two months before the referendum, the Farmers Weekly magazine announced that "58 per cent of farmers backed Brexit" (Clarke 2016). "However, this view [was] largely based on a series of *Farmers Weekly* polls" drawing, not on a sample, "but on self-selected responses" from just 577 readers (Grant 2016, original emphasis). Moreover, within this self-selected group, voting intentions among respondents engaged in different types of farming diverged considerably. Respondents in the horticulture sector, a sector highly dependent on migrant labour, intended to vote Remain, while "those sectors that received little or no support from the [EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)] were most likely to vote Leave" (Grant 2016).

The results of the poll were contested by the National Farmers Union (NFU), the premier organisation representing the interests of farmers, and, as discussed in the next section, a key member of a close-knit policy community that directed rural policy for most of the twentieth century. Based a poll of its members the previous year, the NFU declared: "The results were clear, over half of NFU members (52%) would vote to remain in the EU when polled". Although a question mark remained as to the voting intention of 22% of respondents who were still "undecided" (National Farmers Union 2015). Nevertheless, the narrative has acquired sufficient truthiness to be widely accepted. A survey of readers a year after the referendum (this time with 1,400 responses (again, a self-selected group), of whom "roughly two-thirds"

were farmers) that led Farmers' Weekly to announce that support for Brexit was "as strong as ever" simply confirmed it. Although a more accurate interpretation might be that existing positions, on both sides, had become more entrenched: "The answer among farmers, generally, was 'exactly how I voted last time'. As such, the Leave camp attracted the same 53% support, with the Remain camp gaining just one point." (Clarke 2017).

Moving on to the rural vote as a whole, the picture becomes muddier still. This is despite the existence of definitive figures for the rural vote in the referendum: 55 percent in England and 51 percent in Wales in favour of Leave.[6] However, as discussed later, the categorisation of constituencies as rural has itself been a source of contestation, particularly since 1997 (Ward 2002). Moreover, whether rurality was the determining factor is debateable. Based on an analysis of referendum results in English local authorities categorised as 'rural' and 'partly rural', Wilson (2016) concluded that regional differences may have been more decisive than rurality itself in shaping the outcome. He notes that while "six of the ten areas with the highest Leave vote are rural... the more obvious geography is that the top nine areas all fall within the East Midlands or East Anglia, while the tenth borders the East Midlands" (Wilson 2016, p. 2).

The county that produced the highest polls in favour of Brexit lies at the centre of this geographical area, in a part of the East Midlands that borders East Anglia. Lincolnshire is a primarily agricultural area which grows large amounts of wheat, barley, sugar beet and oilseed rape; as well as potatoes, cabbages, cauliflower and onions in the south of the county where the soil is rich in nutrients. Much of this production is mechanised and employment opportunities have reduced substantially in recent decades. However, the horticulture sector in the south of the county remains labour intensive; employing a predominantly EU migrant workforce on a seasonal basis. If, as predicted by Farmers Weekly, farmers in migrant labour-dependent farming areas like Lincolnshire voted Remain (Grant 2016), the wider population emphatically did not. The two highest Leave votes nationwide were in constituencies in South Lincolnshire: Boston (75.6 percent) and South Holland (73.6 percent); with neighbouring East Lindsey (70.7 percent) not far behind (BBC News, 2016c). A number of factors might account for this. This is a region with a low concentration of graduates, and a high concentration of individuals who identify as English; both factors correlated with Leave voting (BBC News 2016b). As does the high rate of "ethnic change" due to increased EU in-migration, from Romania and Bulgaria, for work in the horticulture sector (Kaufmann 2016).

Yet employment of migrants in this region and sector is not new. Under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS), in place from 1945, migrant workers from European countries were employed in what was a tightly regulated guest worker arrangement. Demand from large supermarket chains since the 1990s has put pressure on growers to increase 'quality' and reduce their margins; leading to further internationalisation of the workforce under increasingly exploitative conditions (Rogaly 2008). Following accession of Central and Eastern European States to the EU in 2007, after which (contrary to popular belief) restrictions for unskilled workers remained in place during the transition period, the SAWS was discontinued in 2013; and non-UK EU citizens began to exercise their free movement rights (McGuinness and Grimwood 2017). It appears that this shift in status of EU migrants, rather than their increased numbers *per se*, and their integration into the local community (coinciding with the closure of the migration impact fund nationwide) may have increased voters' receptiveness to Leave campaigns' anti-immigration messages.

The foregoing discussion is illustrative of the need for more contextualised understanding of results polled in particular regions, which cannot be explained in terms of a generic 'rural vote'. In South Lincolnshire, factors likely to have influenced the vote can be traced to the ongoing intensification of production in buyer-driven agri-food chains; a process actively encouraged by successive governments (Rogaly 2008). A similar enquiry in another region would produce a different, but equally complex and situated interaction of factors operating at different scales. While this region remains primarily agricultural, in much of rural England agriculture is no longer the primary industry (DEFRA 2018, p. 57). Moreover, popular notions of rural life are shaped by enduring images of the countryside as a 'rural idyll' (Woods 2005), for reasons that are explored in the next section. This is despite the persistence of underemployment, social exclusion and homelessness in many rural areas: problems obscured by geographical dispersal and social stigma (Black *et al.* 2018; Cloke and Milbourne 2006; Milbourne 2006).

'There'll always be an England' – rurality, hierarchy, empire

The image of rural England as harmonious, stable and unchanging is a powerful one (Williams, 1973). It has historically been contrasted with an urban England cast as troubled and conflict-ridden, where politics sets "class against class, party against party" (Woods 2005, p. 4). The idea of the "apolitical countryside" was "a mythic construct, designed to direct attention away from the political structures" that existed "to discourage challenges to the existing power elite" (Woods 2005, p. 4). At the time of the First World War, this distinction between country and

city was still a cornerstone of power relations in which a landowning elite, evolved from an ancient aristocratic class, maintained control of the countryside. Rural populations were governed by "the local squire in a political system based on personal authority and interpersonal ties of employment and tenancy" (Woods 2005, p. 11); while a business elite linked to Chambers of Trade, Rotary Club and Masonic Lodges ran the market towns that served the countryside.

To remain the same, sometimes things have to change[7]. After the First World War this dual system continued, but the 'squirocracy' gave way to a new class of farmer-landowners, who were only too happy to replace the aristocracy within the existing hierarchical ordering. The ascendancy of the farmer-landowner class further entrenched the notion, established in the era of the 'great estates', of the rural as an *agricultural* space. The status quo was maintained through a mode of rural politics that incorporated complementary processes of external and internal representation (Woods 2005). Externally, rural politics was overseen by an "iron triangle" (Jordan 1981) of the Conservative Party, National Farmers Union (NFU) and Country Landowners Association (CLA). The *raison d'être* of the NFU, in particular, was to enhance the interest of farmers. The union was thus "complicit in productivism, bringing guaranteed levels of income to farmers" while "encouraging the amalgamation of small family farms… and a reduction in the agricultural labour force" (Woods 2003, p. 311).

Complementary mechanisms for internal representation also mitigated against political mobilisation, encouraging deference to larger farmers and business owners: "Their leadership was reinforced by the prevalence of discourses of the organic community and the apolitical community" (Woods 2005). Rural residents were encouraged to identify with community rather than class. Local politics was managed by elites in such a way that only "mundane issues" were discussed, and the interests of agrarian capital "rarely challenged" (Woods 2003, p. 311). The Conservative ideology of "property rights, maintenance of social order, and balancing of tradition and progress" (Woods 2005, p. 85) was the 'glue' that held this system of rural politics together. So embedded was Conservatism in the governance of rural life that it barely registered as politics, but rather as the absence of it (cf. Phibbs 2018). This ideology extended to constituencies held by the Liberal Party (then the main political alternative in Britain's two-party system). While the opposing parties stood on different national policy platforms "in local government there was a consensus between Liberal and Conservative

landowners about the basic values of rural society", and an understanding that "candidates of both parties" should be "drawn from the right social background" (Woods 1997, p. 459).

What Woods (2005) has called the "Conservative discourse of rurality" conflated "Conservativism, ruralism and British, or at least English national identity" (Woods 2005 p. 89). Its significance went beyond rural politics to project rural interests onto the national imagination. Rural areas were framed as "national heartlands" and "symbols of national spirit and character". A harmonious, apolitical countryside was counterposed to the city as a space "corrupted by foreign influences" (Woods 2005, p. 89). This discourse was closely interwoven with the role played by the landed classes in building the British Empire, following the dismantling of the great estates after the First World War (Woods 2005, p. 33). As Daniels (1993, p. 6) explains, "the very global reach of English imperialism, into alien lands, was accompanied by a countervailing sentiment for cosy home scenery, for thatched cottages and gardens in pastoral countryside." This Great Britain/Little England pairing is echoed in the lyrics of 'There'll always be an England', a more wistful accompaniment to jingoistic wartime anthems like 'Rule Britannia' and 'Land of Hope and Glory':

> There'll always be an England
> While there's a country lane
> Wherever there's a cottage small
> Beside a field of grain

The end of the First World War saw "the beginnings of a political realignment in Britain" in which an ascendant Labour Party, with roots in the trade union movement, replaced the Liberal Party in a two-party system now drawn more sharply along class lines (MacAllister *et al.* 2002, p. 425). However, the Labour Party anchored its expression of national identity in the industrial labour movement[8], allowing the Conservative discourse of rurality to persist (Woods, 2005, p. 89). This continuity was encapsulated by "rural eulogies" woven into speeches by figures like Stanley Baldwin, the most prominent Conservative politician of the inter-war years:

> Stanley Baldwin, Prime Minister from 1924 to 1927 and 1935 to 1937, and dominant in the National Government from 1931 to 1937, "was known for his rural eulogies": "to me England is the country, and the country is England. And when I ask myself what I mean by England, … England comes to me through my various senses." Baldwin

> called up the sounds of hammer on anvil…, corncrakes and scythes, the sight of a plough-team, the smell of wood smoke: "These things strike down into the very depths of our nature" (Matless 2016, p. 30)

After World War II the Labour Party enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the countryside following the landslide victory of 1945 in which it won 69 rural seats. However, despite a more consensual approach than its pre-war discourse on the 'tyranny' of rural power structures suggested, Labour was nevertheless unable to "shake off the suspicion of rural voters". The party lost many of its rural seats in the 1950 and 1951 elections, and, along with them, its interest in forging a distinct rural policy agenda (Woods 2008, pp. 12-13).

This post-war period also saw the dismantling of the British Empire, which, conventional wisdom held, did not generate a crisis of confidence or identity at home. In contrast to France, for whom the Algerian war of independence precipitated a domestic political crisis, Britain's disengagement from its former colonies was understood as an orderly, rational, pragmatic and even altruistic endeavour (Schwarz 2011). Concluding that England itself had undergone "no organic change" as a result of building an empire, nor of its demise, erstwhile champions of colonialism took this as further evidence of British (or rather English) exceptionalism (Powell 1961, p. 19). This blind spot obscured a simmering crisis of national identity, from which a "new politics of the right"[9] emerged (Schwarz 2011; in Francis 2013, p. 227). A new articulation of "settler populism became a vehicle for the ideological recasting of the political right". The language of 'racial whiteness' was used to make sense of the presence in Britain of non-white commonwealth citizens, by members of an indigenous population that re-imagined themselves as beleaguered white settlers (Francis 2013, p. 227).

As issues of race and immigration found their way into domestic politics, the urban/rural dichotomy came into play again: as a device to define race relations as an urban problem, since in the countryside there were "no people from ethnic minorities and hence 'no race problem here'" (Holloway 2007, p. 9). This view has been challenged by artists like Ingrid Pollard, whose captioned photography explores her experience, as a black woman, in the English countryside in the 1980s. "Pollard's experience as a visitor to various British landscapes has involved racial abuse, expressions of surprise and shock at her presence there as a black person". Pollard drew on these experiences "to articulate what she found to be a collective experience of black people in Britain, that of finding the British countryside to be a 'landscape of fear'" (Kinsman 1995, p. 306). Meanwhile a racialised image of the countryside "as a place

of white safety" has become normalised (Holloway 2007, p. 8). The implication of Pollard's work is profound: "if a group is excluded from landscapes of national identity" in this way "then they are excluded to a large degree from the nation itself" (Kinsman 1995, p. 301).

This idea of the countryside as a 'place of white safety' can also be found in alternative visions of 'organic England' (Wright 1996). Counterculture movements, from 1970s free festivals celebrating "the other Albion of peace and love", to the peace camps and convoys of 1980s, challenging rural traditions of hierarchy and enclosure, were nevertheless "white utopias" (McKay 1996, p. 11). The example of 1990s road protests, one of the most successful challenges to the rural establishment, is instructive. An ambitious road building plan by the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher aimed to build 2,700 miles (4,300 km) of new major roads and 150 new bypasses. The self-named "Dongas tribe", joining travellers with former peace camp residents, set up home in treehouses on land earmarked for road building. For the Dongas, opposition to roads was more than a single issue as it "embraced issues of land ownership, environmentalism, health and pollution, technology, big business, regional and self-empowerment and self-development, the power of the law itself" (McKay 1996, p. 135).

The term Dongas "derives from the landscape the tribe came together to preserve". It is "a Matabele name adopted in the nineteenth century by Winchester College teachers for the medieval pathways that criss-cross the downs" (McKay 1996, p. 136). Winchester College is an elite private school[10], founded in 1382, of the type that played a major role in building the empire though its production of generations of colonial administrators, as well as being the landowner of Twyford down, the proposed site for the new Winchester bypass. That Dongas is a Matabele word highlights further the colonial connection: Matabeleland is a region of Zimbabwe, formerly the British colony of Southern Rhodesia and then the autonomous white-settler colony, Rhodesia. That the radical 'Dongas tribe' could name themselves as such while declaring themselves indigenous Englanders in the tradition of the diggers who had, in the seventeenth century, sought to reclaim the commons from enclosure is illustrative of the often unconscious, intertwining of rurality, hierarchy and empire within English identity. Another group, "The Land is Ours", claimed a similar heritage in occupying Wisley Airfield, chosen for its proximity to St Georges Hill, the site occupied by the diggers in 1649 (Monbiot 1998). Commentators like Rupa Huq (now a Labour MP) have questioned the emancipatory claims of such groups; with their practice of "valorising the land" and tapping into a "little Englander

narrative" that is associated, consciously or not, with nostalgia for empire and a collective memory of rural England as a "black-free zone" (Huq, quoted in McKay 1998, p. 33).

A new 'politics of the rural'

The central contention of this paper is that a deep unsettling of rural power structures that occurred in the long decade of the 1990s was an important, yet largely unrecognised, precursor to Brexit. In just a few years, the calm prosperity of rural England early in the 1990s was disrupted as rural people, outraged by what they saw as intrusive regulation of a rural 'way of life' by ill-informed urban elites, engaged in large-scale protests. The countryside rallies that 'came to town' in those years occupied urban space, physically and symbolically, while reanimating the rural/urban divide in a new "politics of the rural" (Woods 2005).

The very idea of a 'countryside in crisis' would not have been foreseen in the early 1990s. Farm incomes were rising after a dip in the late 1980s, and benefits of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) were recognised by the rural policy establishment. So convinced were they of the benefits to farmers, and for rural life more generally, of EU membership, that in 1996, Farmers' Weekly was moved to express its concern at a re-emergence of Euroscepticism within the ruling Conservative party (Howkins 2003, p. 208). Not everyone was benefiting from the upturn, however. If a booming agricultural sector was one side of the coin, land value appreciation, and consequent rising house prices and rents, was the other. This both coincided with, and reflected, rising demand from well-heeled urbanites, both commuters and retirees, for first and second homes in the country – in search of their own 'rural idyll'.

The "aspirational ruralism" of affluent in-migrants challenged the hegemony of a traditional "reactionary ruralism" associated with an agrarian-centred way of life. The rural working class gained little from these transformations, however, finding themselves squeezed between stagnant wages and underemployment and rising housing costs. In the event, higher farm incomes had not translated into local employment, as jobs were displaced by mechanisation and increased use of subcontractors (Howkins 2003, p. 209). Rural representation started to reflect the power of middle-class in-migrants to advocate for the kind of rural lifestyle they wish to 'consume', particularly in Southern Counties "within commuting distance of urban centres on whose economic activity maintenance of such a lifestyle depends" (Woods 2005, p. 186). Meanwhile new concerns such as environmentalism and animal welfare produced an emergent "progressive ruralism" that broadened the scope of state intervention into rural

society beyond the agrarian economy (Woods 2003, p. 318). The road protests of the early 1990s heralded a new era of environmental activism, targeting issues such as genetically modified (GM) crops (Levidow 2000), hunting with hounds, and transportation of live animals; in which the farmer was often cast as "heartless and driven by profit" (Howkins, 2003, p. 217).

A singular, hegemonic ruralism – agrarian, hierarchical, conservative – was thus displaced by a more conflictual dynamic of competing ruralisms, each with its own conception – its own ideal, or idyll - *of* the rural. In the process, a closed system of rural politics, centred on substantive rural concerns – seen as synonymous with agrarian concerns – gave way to a "politics of the rural" populated by competing ruralisms and rural identities (Woods 2005). In midst of this new politics, the livestock sector suffered a further blow when the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE, the so-called 'mad cow disease') controversy returned the spotlight to agrarian issues, but in a way that did nothing to regain public sympathy for farmers. In response to evidence of its link to Variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob Disease (vCJD) in humans[11] the EU imposed an immediate worldwide ban on export of British beef in 1996. British supermarkets saw an immediate slump in beef sales, announcing they would henceforth source beef elsewhere. "The cost to British farming was huge. By the time the EU beef ban was lifted in 1998 more than 4 million cattle had been slaughtered" (Howkins 2003, p. 222). The total cost of the epidemic was estimated at £6 billion. For farmers the costs went beyond loss of livestock, to a longer-term fall in profits that stemmed from "consumer doubts about a whole range of farm products" and a resulting shift in dietary habits (Howkins 2003, p. 222).

It was against this backdrop that in the 1997 general election the Labour Party not only won a landslide victory overall but also secured "170 of the parliamentary constituencies defined by the Boundary Commission as 'county constituencies'; more than the other two parties combined" (Ward 2002, p. 171). In contrast to the 1945 Labour Government, 'New Labour' was determined to pursue distinct rural policies (Woods 2005). Claiming the Conservative mantle of 'one nation party', the incoming Labour administration articulated a rural programme embedded in its broader regional and devolution policy agenda (Goodwin 2008, p. 46); in which commonality of problems faced by rural and urban communities alike was emphasised (Woods 2008). A rural white paper "sought to encourage public and private investment in market towns as hubs for ICT, public transport and business" and promised "'a new deal on services' … which tackled deprivation and social exclusion" (Ward 2008, pp. 33-34).

Meanwhile the Conservative Party "had not only been ejected from office after 18 years in government, but also found itself with fewer MPs than at any time since 1906" and with its lowest share of the popular vote "since 1832" (Ward 2002, p. 172). This sparked a 'crisis of representation' as the party with which traditional rural interests most identified was now politically marginalised (Ward 2002, p. 179). Conservative politicians and commentators challenged Labour's claim to represent rural Britain – founded on a contested definition based on the county constituency. In the process, the long-settled question of "who has legitimacy 'speak for' rural interests" (Ward 2002, p. 171) was reopened.

The countryside comes to town

In November 1995 Sir David Steele, peer and former party leader of the Liberal Democrats[12], announced the launch of a 'Countryside Movement'. The media launch stated the movement would "for the first time" offer the countryside "the opportunity to speak with one voice". While open to all, the established 'iron triangle' was well represented in an executive which included the NFU president, a past president of CLA, and the Duke of Westminster, one of Britain's richest landowners (Milbourne 1997, p. 1). It was notable, however, that Steele was not a Conservative politician. Both he and former Labour minister, Lord Cledwyn of Penrhos, also on the board, had strong links to sympathisers within their respective parties. This signalled a felt need for "an overt, dedicated rural lobby" beyond the Conservative party (Woods 2005).

A catalyst for this new institutional formation was a hardening of public opinion against blood sports; a position with which the (soon to be in power) Labour party was sympathetic. The Countryside Movement had been preceded by a more focused campaign, the British Field Sports Society (BFSS), drawn from the landed elite, which used its established networks to "ensure pro-hunting majorities could be marshalled in parliament" (Woods 2005, p. 103). In 1997 the BFSS, Countryside Movement and Country Business Group merged to form the 'Countryside Alliance', which went on to organise a series of protests, each one significantly larger than the last. Strategies consciously adopted to broaden the Alliance's appeal had included a widening of the board membership and movement of "peers and large landowners to more behind the scenes roles"; "appointment of non-hunting officers to give the impression of being a broad based movement with all rural issues at its heart"; encouraging hunt supporters to join animal welfare charities "to make hunting acceptance to more people"; and presenting foxhunting "as an issue of traditional civil liberties" (Corporate Watch 2002, pp. 38-39).

The first protest was held in Hyde Park, attracting 120,000 people. The event was a media success, not only in terms of coverage, but in its framing, not as a pro-hunting march, but as a *countryside* protest. Crucially, the 'countryside in crisis' frame employed by a supportive print press (especially the Conservative Party 'house paper', the Telegraph) explained the scale of mobilisation of a normally apolitical constituency "as an *emotional* response, rather than an act of political calculation" (Woods 2010, p. 223, emphasis added). The following year a 'Countryside March' through the streets of London attracted 250,000 protestors. In 2002 the largest demonstration, the Liberty and Livelihood March, attracted 400,000 participants.

While many of the placards on show carried a pro-hunting message, "a minority alluded to other issues including the agricultural slump, housing development and the closure of rural services" (Woods 2005, p. 104). However, these socioeconomic concerns remained somewhat marginal in a movement built around an identity politics centred on locale rather than class. The countryside theme effectively neutralised these grievances, fusing them with elite interests in what was heralded as a "huge display of unity" (Woods 2005, p. 104). By redeploying the ancient rural/urban divide as the political fault-line, a commonality was suggested between hunting and other problems faced by rural areas, even as some farm labourers had been coerced into joining the protests.

Probably the most emotive of the Alliance's slogans was 'Say no to the urban jackboot'. Here the rural-urban divide was "not only geographical but also cultural and *moral*", due to "the incompatibility of rural and urban cultures". While asymmetric power relations rendered rural dwellers "a beleaguered minority under attack from an insensitive urban majority", they claimed the moral high ground. Why? Because they were doing nothing less than "performing the countryside's historical role as the repository and defender of the nation's national freedom and values" against an "amorphous un-English, un-British, urbanity" (Woods 2005, pp. 114-5, emphasis added). This rhetoric was reminiscent of that employed by "settler political leaders like president of the Central African Federation Roy Welensky (1956-1963) and Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith (1964-1979), [who] portrayed their fellow settlers as authentic white Britons in conflict with out of touch, metropolitan liberal elite in league with black anti-colonial nationalists" (Schwarz 2011, pp. 347, 398-399, quoted in Liburd 2018).

Meanwhile the Alliance's use of slogans like the 'rural way of life' when referring to a landscape that, despite decades of postcolonial immigration, remained racially white, was read by some as a coded language for ensuring the countryside remained "effectively a no-go zone for non-white Britons" (Alibhai-Brown 2002). Alibhai-Brown (2002) argued that the exclusionary, racially-coded language used by the Alliance reasserted the exclusion of people of colour from the countryside, and by extension, from the nation itself, in ways that, as discussed earlier, the photographer Ingrid Pollard's work had illuminated (Kinsman 1995). Questioning the wisdom of the heir to the throne and future head of state, Prince Charles, in throwing in his lot with the Alliance, Alibhai-Brown wrote:

> Has he given the slightest thought to why it is that the countryside remains such a no-go area for most people of colour? Hundreds of thousands of black and Asian Britons have farming in their blood … but have you ever seen a black or Asian farmer or farm worker? Does Charles really not wonder that there might be a coded message behind all these 'way of life' complaints? You don't see any black or Asian people on these marches … and often extreme nationalist groups are in there with their repulsive ambitions to claim back Britain for whites (Alibhai-Brown 2002).

Alliance leaders and supporters' attempts to position the countryside protests within a radical tradition of emancipatory protest in Britain was ultimately at odds with its "use of structures of paternalism, deference and social stratification in their organisation" (Woods 2005, p. 129). Its "discourse of powerlessness and oppression [sat] uneasily with the resources … available to the militant rural groups" from prominent supporters in the traditional landowning elite (Woods 2005, p. 129). The more militant Farmers for Action group is a case in point. Founded at a meeting at a motorway service station in May 2000 and taking their cue from French farmers' fuel price protests (BBC n.d.); by September of that year the group had the networks and resources in place to mount a nationwide blockade of petrol refineries (Reed 2008, p. 214). Far from being a separate fringe, Woods (2005) argues that these radical elements formed part of a "complex web of inter-dependence" which extended to familiar players in the rural policy establishment. While media coverage of radical actions kept up the pressure on politicians, insider organisations like the NFU navigated a more contested policy terrain in which corporate actors, not farmers and their representatives, now set the agenda (Reed 2008, p. 214).

Ultimately, these events were eclipsed by the Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak of 2001, just a few years after the BSE crisis, which marked the death knell of rural policymaking as the province of the agriculture sector: a sector whose productivist model was increasingly seen, not only as the underlying cause of repeated crises, but as a threat to the 'rural idyll' itself. While the government responded to FMD as crisis in *agriculture* – to the chagrin of tourism operators, now the main employer in many rural areas – it demonstrated beyond doubt just how non-agricultural rural England had now become. As the Wall Street Journal observed in March 2001, "this is probably the last time farming can get the British government to shut down the countryside for its own sake" (quoted in Howkins 2003, p. 234).

Despite the agitations of the Countryside Alliance, trends of counter-urbanisation and gentrification continued apace. Inhabitants of 'enclaves of the wealthy', more connected to the world of global business and finance than traditional rural institutions, continued to displace once-familiar features of what had once been a "living and working countryside" (Adams 2017). Meanwhile the Countryside Alliance, whose offices had "filled with ex-Conservative officials and MPs" following their wipe-out in the 1997 election (Cohen 2000), had provided the Conservative Party with "a political survival strategy to maintain support among its core supporters before attempting to begin its political recovery" (Ward 2002, p. 180).

From the Countryside Alliance to Brexit – exploring the links

The 2010 general election produced a hung parliament, leading to the formation of the first coalition government in the UK since the Second World War. This was a Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition, with David Cameron, Conservative Party leader, as Prime Minister and Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, as Deputy Prime Minister. Since taking on the party leadership in 2005, David Cameron had sought to improve the party's electability through his particular brand of 'modern' and 'compassionate' conservatism. In an era when the main arena for political contestation was now the 'centre ground', the party pursued a felt need to reach beyond its traditional base and shake off its reputation as "the nasty party" (White and Perkins 2002). On becoming Prime Minister in 2010 Cameron went as far as to promise the coalition government would be "the greenest government ever" (Randerson 2010).[13]

Having rebuilt its core support during its wilderness years with its traditional base in the Countryside Alliance, therefore, the Conservative Party, after losing three elections, veered in a different direction under Cameron. One concession to the right of the party had been the

severance of its long-term membership of the European Peoples Party (EEP) in the European Parliament, in order to form a new, Eurosceptic group called the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) (Mullholland 2009). In other respects, however, Cameron carved out a new image for the party in what proved to be a successful strategy for reaching a wider electorate and, while not sufficient to form a majority government, at least to return to power in coalition.

In 2013, an article in the news magazine *Spectator* declared, more ominously than perhaps was realised at the time: "David Cameron has lost the countryside" (Kite 2013). Tournier-Sol (2015) notes how shifts in the Conservatives' image and agenda under Cameron had alienated a section of the voter base identifying more strongly with what Hall and Jacques called "organic patriotic Toryism[14]"; a belief system associated with former Conservative and Ulster Unionist MP and anti-immigration campaigner Enoch Powell (1983 p. 10, in Tournier-Sol 2015, p. 146). For this constituency, a political party that had previously been a single-issue party on the fringes of British politics was ready to provide a home. The origins of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) were as a Eurosceptic Party, founded in 1993 to oppose the Maastricht Treaty. Thereafter it had widened its remit to accommodate a set of "feelings and experiences … embedded in recent British experience for particular groups, especially older, white English men". Blending elements of Euroscepticism, Conservatism and populism, UKIP was able to tap into a sense of Englishness "framed nostalgically" around an empire-era England rooted in "rural landscapes" as "the ethnic homelands of the English" (Reed 2016, p. 228).

Echoing the Great Britain/Little England pairing of earlier times, this resurgent English nationalism coincided with a re-emergence of elite interest in the 'Anglosphere'. This term groups the UK with former dominions of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, in what proponents believe represents a more "natural and organic political community" than the EU (Wellings and Baxendale 2015, p. 127). The idea of the Anglosphere as a new institutional formation had been evolving since a series of conferences in 1999-2000 attended by, among others, senior Conservative figures (including Margaret Thatcher and former Brexit Secretary David Davies) and Conrad Black, then owner of the Telegraph newspaper group (informally known as the Conservative Party 'house paper'; and the staunchest media supporter of the Countryside Alliance (Woods 2010)). The idea of renewing the "Commonwealth tradition" with (implicitly white) English speaking 'kith and kin' cohered with an ethnic populism located "within a politics of Eurosceptic Anglo-Britishness" (Wellings and Baxendale 2015, p. 126).

In this vision, a vision of Britain's past – rooted in colonial era ambitions of a 'Greater Britain' – merged seamlessly with a desire to reassert English dominance over the United Kingdom.

One policy issue that proved fruitful for UKIP was opposition to renewable energy, particularly windfarms, in rural areas. This provided a platform for UKIP to articulate a position combining climate change scepticism and contempt for 'political correctness'; while presenting themselves as stalwart defenders of traditional rural landscapes complete with hunting parties and village pubs (Reed 2016, p. 237). As wind power proved an increasingly toxic issue for Conservative-led rural councils, under its charismatic leader Nigel Farage, UKIP positioned itself as the party that spoke the language of the traditional Conservative voter, as demonstrated by a "UKIP surge" in the polls after the 2010 election (Tournier-Sol 2015). UKIP, with its "winning formula" of Euroscepticism, "organic patriotic Toryism" and ethnic English populism (Tournier-Sol 2015) was able to tap into a "colonial conception of a metropolitan liberal elite as out of touch and in league with the 'other'"; reminiscent of that employed by the Countryside Alliance. "This is perhaps unsurprising when many of the main spokespeople for [UKIP, and later also] the Leave campaign were born or raised in the white enclaves where this kind of politics developed, in countries like Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, and Uganda" (Liburd 2018; see also Younge 2018).

On 23 January 2013, David Cameron, pledged to hold an "in/out referendum" on UK membership of the EU if the Conservatives won the next election (BBC News 2013). While the influence of their coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, who had for many years advocated electoral reforms such as proportional voting and increased use of referenda, cannot be discounted, the context for Cameron's acquiescence on this issue – at this particular time – was undoubtably a desire to settle an ideological conflict within the political right. Cameron's pledge, made with the expectation that another hung parliament would make it difficult to fulfil, "was clearly aimed at 'shooting the UKIP fox'" (Tournier-Sol 2015, p. 148). In the 2015 general election, the Conservatives unexpectedly won a majority, enabling them to govern alone. The question now was not if, but when the referendum would be held.

Conclusion

The referendum result came as a shock, triggering an urgent search for causes. Even more than the result itself (in terms of which side 'won'); the realisation that the country was, in effect, split down the middle, has left the society polarised; in public and civic spheres and in the

private spaces of family and sociality. This was exacerbated by the divisive political campaigning that preceded the poll, in a style of politics that continues to set the political tone. Against this backdrop, narratives of Brexit that crystallised soon after the referendum, acquiring their respective champions, have solidified. Britain's largest party of the left, the Labour Party, based its diagnoses on the experiences of what it regards as its traditional base in the post-industrial landscapes of Northern England, for whom post-financial crisis austerity policies had exacerbated the effects of decades of underinvestment. Its readings of Brexit locate the answer to 'why people voted Leave' in Sunderland, a city in Northeast England taken to symbolise post-industrial decline (and where 63.1 percent voted for Brexit); rather than Boston and its rural surroundings where the highest Leave votes were polled.

Support for Brexit can be traced to a crisis of the political right triggered by the 1997 national election in which the Labour Party won a significant number of rural constituencies. Their claim to be a 'one nation' government bridging the urban-rural divide challenged a century-old political settlement based on the immovability of that divide. Rural elites lost the certainty associated with the previously unbroken Conservative hegemony through which their interests had been assured. Their response was a protest movement defending the rural 'way of life' that grew out of opposition to a hunting ban. Among its activists were out of office Conservative Party figures for whom it provided a platform from which to begin the long road back to power.

This paper took as its departure point the assertion that the Brexit vote indicates that "power has leaked to the countryside" (Beckett 2016). This may seem surprising given the low proportion of the population residing in areas defined as rural (just 17.6 per cent of England's 55.3 million population live in rural towns, villages and hamlets (DEFRA 2018, p. 11)). While public debate about Brexit and rurality has been shaped by a conventional understanding of rural politics as focused on substantive rural concerns, it is when we apply Woods' concept of the 'politics of the rural' that the salience of Beckett's statement becomes apparent.

The discourses of the Countryside Alliance cast itself as a defender, not only of rural interests, but of true national values, under threat from an out of touch urban elite "corrupted by foreign influences" (Woods 2005, p. 89). The elision of race, rurality and nation is reflective of the landed classes' historical connection with empire as colonial administrators and white settlers while retaining ancestral control over pastoral landscapes back home. The type of politics that characterised the Alliance, and which would later resurface in the campaigns to exit the EU,

first developed within white enclaves in colonies such as Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) where, as the sun set on the British Empire, white settlers positioned themselves as authentic defenders of the imperial nation against metropolitan elites "in league with black anti-colonial nationalists" (Schwarz 2011, in Liburd 2018). By the mid 2000s, however, a modernising Conservative Party had distanced itself from this politics in order to reach out to a broader constituency. This created space for UKIP, a single-issue Eurosceptic Party, to recast itself as a channel for English nationalism (in which it employed its own 'politics of the rural' in its opposition to windfarms, presenting itself as a defender of traditional rural landscapes). This coincided with a resurgence of interest in the Anglosphere as the UK's "natural" political community: in a vision that projects notions of organic English society (associated with the countryside) onto an international scale; while reasserting the dominance of England over the United Kingdom.

While a 'politics of the rural' lens can help analyse the dynamics behind Brexit at the national level, it also has potential as a conceptual tool for disentangling factors generating support for Brexit in particular localities. The example, discussed in this paper, of areas in rural Lincolnshire returning the highest polls for Leave highlighted as a key driver the intensification of production in supermarket-driven agri-food chains. There is a need to move beyond competing narratives and binaries such as rural vs urban towards a more textured, sensitive reading of perceptions and experiences in divided communities (for an example, see Meek 2019). 'Politics of the rural' provides one lens among others to bring to these analyses.

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Notes

[1] The breakdown of the vote between the nations of the UK was: England and Wales voted to leave (53.4-46.6 and 52.5-47.5), while Scotland and Northern Ireland to remain in the EU (38-62 and 44.2-55.8) (BBC News, 2016a).

[2] Recent studies have shown that the votes of English people who had moved to Wales to take advantage of lower property prices "swung the Welsh Brexit vote" (Leake and Horton, 2019).

[3] The rural vote across the whole of the UK was similar, at 55.4-44.6 per cent in favour of exiting the EU (Wilson, 2016).

[4] This formulation is reminiscent of Castells' (1997) identification of inhabitants of "spaces of flows" vs. "space of places" in the network society (Reed, 2008).

[5] This is in marked contrast to Scotland, whose civic nationalism aspires to the status of a 'normal Northern European country' (Ramsay, 2014). The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru (The Party of Wales), both campaigned for Remain, and, at the time of writing, continue to hold unambiguously 'pro-Remain' positions (BBC News, 2019). In Northern Ireland (NI), following the referendum, Sinn Fein (We Ourselves) proposed NI should have special designated status within the EU (Sinn Fein, 2019). (Sinn Fein is one of the two largest parties in the currently suspended NI Assembly; and is the largest nationalist party in that Assembly.)

[6] No equivalent figures for Scotland and Northern Ireland were located.

[7] Paraphrase of the paradox at the heart the novel (and film) 'The Leopard' by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa.

[8] This was despite early origins of emancipatory politics in England being in rural protests, from the diggers' occupation of St Georges Hill in 1649, during the English civil war; to the Tolpuddle martyrs, who are today still celebrated as the originators of trade unionism in the 1830s.

[9] The previous citation is from a speech by the late Enoch Powell MP, former Conservative government minister, party leadership candidate and anti-immigration campaigner. An early champion of the new politics of the right to which Schwarz (2011) refers; Powell's shadow still looms large in debates about race, immigration and national (particularly English) identity (see Hirsch, 2018 for an illuminating contemporary discussion).

[10] Or as British private schools call themselves, somewhat bafflingly, public schools.

[11] Variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob Disease (vCJD) is a fatal, degenerative brain disorder.

[12] The Liberal Democrats (known as Lib Dems) resulted from a merger, in the 1980s, between the old Liberal Party and a (then) new party formed from a breakaway group of the Labour Party, the Social Democrats.

[13] In that same year, the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW, also a 'pro-Remain' party) gained its first (and still only) MP, former party leader and Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for London and Southeast England since1999, Caroline Lucas; who since then has served as MP for Brighton Pavilion.

[14] Toryism is an informal term for political Conservatism.

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