

Social Quality and Brexit in Stoke-on-Trent

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Abstract: In this article, we seek to provide a social quality–led analysis of some of the conditions that led to the UK population’s collective decision to leave the European Union in June 2016. We draw on interview data collected between 2010 and 2012 to argue that while not predictable, the seeds of the Brexit vote are well rooted in the conditions experienced by many of the working classes in Britain’s most deprived postindustrial communities. We argue that the ongoing decline in economic security, effective enfranchisement, social inclusion, and social empowerment have all had profound consequences for working-class communities and that the outcome of the Brexit vote was rooted, at least in part, in their subjective experiences and disenchantment forged in this ongoing decline.

Keywords: Brexit, disenfranchisement, populism, marginalization, social quality, Stoke-on-Trent, working class

The United Kingdom European membership referendum (variously known as “the Brexit vote” or the EU referendum) in 2016 has, and will continue to have, significant ramifications for the UK and its future relationships with other nations around the world, particularly its neighbors in Europe. With the Leave campaign winning the vote by a margin of 52 percent to 48 percent, there has been a growing body of analysis of the reasons behind the vote and ramifications of it, with much of the analysis focusing on macro national or regional trends (see, e.g., Ashcroft 2016; Clarke et al. 2017). Areas of the United Kingdom that have endured prolonged deprivation, such as in the former industrial and mining heartlands of Britain, were among the

leaders of the charge to leave the EU (see Goodwin and Heath 2016).

One such locality can be found in Stoke-on-Trent, and with nearly 70 percent of the local population voting to leave, the city had one of the highest proportions of leave voters in the country (BBC 2016). This led to former United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) leader Paul Nuttall naming the city—much to the chagrin of many who live there—“the Brexit Capital of Britain.” This article builds on Steve Corbett’s (2016) analysis of the role of Euroscepticism, populism, and English nationalism in the Brexit vote, and its potential societal consequences by drawing on social quality theory (SQT) to provide a more in-depth region focused analysis of the anti-EU sentiment in the UK, its connections to the problems that people face in their daily lives in a neoliberal society, and its manifestation in the vote to leave the EU. In the process, this article will engage with one of the paradoxes at the heart of the Brexit vote. Stoke—like many other economically deprived, deindustrialized areas of the English Midlands and North—received significant support from the European Union Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which helped to stimulate the local economy, providing employment to those sections of the local population most affected by economic decline, yet the local electorate still voted by a notable majority to leave the EU. We will explore how an analysis rooted in SQT of this apparent quandary can offer a more nuanced and theoretically informed understanding of the Brexit vote in this locality.

Much of this article draws on a subset of interviews produced by socioculturally and socioeconomically precarious men during fieldwork undertaken by one of the authors from 2010 to 2012 as part of a doctoral research project which examined experiences of unemployment and its’ influence on crime, identity, and social exclusion in the city. Stoke is a microcosm of a fundamental crisis of “social quality” (SQ) in the everyday lives of members of precarious

communities across the UK and beyond. In this context, the Brexit vote in communities like Stoke can be seen as part of a much wider assemblage of symptomatic changes from “the rise of the right” (Winlow et al. 2017), the rise of independent and anti-politics movements in local political discourse, and growing levels of hostility toward both local and national structures of governance, to the decline of electoral engagement. We argue that the outcome of the vote and the increasing antipathy toward the EU that underpinned it—*despite* the unquestionable economic benefits to the local region derived from continued EU membership—cannot be simply dismissed as an irrational outburst or product of a supine and media manipulated local population. Rather we argue that the EU vote was a manifestation of a profound local crisis of the drivers for SQ in Stoke and was fueled by an upsurge in anger at the ingrained structural inequalities that people, and in the case of this article, men, in places like Stoke-on-Trent face have ultimately fed into the national vote to leave the EU.

Given that the narratives underpinning this article predate the vote, we do not intend to argue that they show that “Brexit” was either inevitable or predictable. Equally, we are not seeking to engage with wider discussions as to whether Brexit is inherently “good” or “bad” for the country as a whole or for the communities that voted for it. Rather, we intend to illustrate that key indicators of a lack of social quality—the decline in the nature of daily circumstances for significant local populations with an embedded “folk memory” of dependable and secure employment in now departed industries, a perceived lack of effective local political representation, and feelings of marginalization and powerlessness—were, and continue to be, rooted deeply within postindustrial communities like Stoke. This lack of SQ can help us to explain why so many people did eventually vote to leave.

We intend to better understand the nuances of the decision to vote to leave by situating

this decision within the impacts of historic decline on the broader context of voters own subjective realities and their decision to ignore warnings that voting to leave would likely have a significant impact on the local economy and their lives as a whole. In doing so, we seek to offer a counterpoint to dominant narratives that suggest that working-class Brexit voters are a homogenous, uneducated, lazy, and easily led mass who uncritically consumed and regurgitated emotive and potentially misleading Leave campaign messages, narratives, and slogans. While the decision of many Stoke residents to vote to leave the EU may not appear rational to an outside observer who might assume that the path out of the challenges faced by Stoke and similar communities is largely economic, such decisions and votes are entirely rational when considering the broader subjective experiences and attitudes of these individuals that concern topics of social recognition and responsiveness (as crucial elements of SQ), thus causing the lack of SQ, that are in many respects prefigured in the pre-Brexit vote interviews examined here.

Moreover, while addressing a microcosm of the UK population and the impacts that a lack of social quality has had on them, their lives, views, experiences, and potential reasons to vote for Brexit, there are significant international ramifications for these findings—not least because of the significant change to the UK’s relationship with its closest geographical and trading partners. There is growing inequality, marginalization, protectionism, and disenfranchisement around the world, particularly in the West. This has seen the rise of populism in many countries, the near election of Marine Le Pen of the Front National in France, the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, a right-wing populist-led coalition in Austria, and right-wing governments being elected in Poland and Hungary, among others. By the end of this article, we hope that it will be apparent that continual failures to tackle the lack of social quality, as experienced in the daily lives of disadvantaged, excluded, and marginalized

populations across the West, may continue to spur similar populist anti-EU manifestations elsewhere in Europe, and new populist manifestations in the UK in the period leading up to and in the aftermath of Brexit.

Theoretical Framework

Originally proposed as a standard by which to judge the quality of everyday experiences and interactions of European citizens (Walker 2005: 44), the SQ approach is defined as “the extent to which people are able to participate in societal based relationships under conditions which enhance their well-being, capacities and potential” (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012a: 68). It takes as its starting point the fact that people are social beings, rather than atomized, utilitarian, economic actors as they are often reduced to under economically focused approaches, and that interactions with wider collective identities inform the individual’s development (Walker 2015). Achieving SQ is not simply a case of participation, but rather “a form of participation in which people are able to shape their own circumstances and contribute to societal development in such a way that it will further social justice, solidarity, equal value and human dignity” (Beck et al. 2012: 69). It is not enough to enfranchise people and provide the illusion of them influencing the outcome of events and societal changes. Rather, they should be genuinely involved and able to have a real impact on what unfolds and its impact on their life at all levels—from work, to civic engagement, to local and national enfranchisement.

Peter Herrmann and colleagues (2012: 70) suggest that SQT provides us with a tool to consider the role and impact of a manifold of societally oriented policies and its influence on major trends, contradictions, and challenges within society. The approach, which seeks to understand the complex nature of society along both local and global lines, is underpinned by

three sets of factors: constitutional factors that influence the individual's self-realization and ability to develop bonds in secure, stable, and understandable contexts of rules and rights; conditional factors addressing socioeconomic security, social cohesion, inclusion, and empowerment; and normative factors that emphasize the need for social justice (equity), solidarity, equal value, and human dignity (see Beck et al. 2012: 56–66). These combine to provide the foundations for “a decent society” (Abbott et al. 2016) that enfranchises and engages citizens in an active, meaningful way and is premised on the idea that four conditional factors are met (Walker 2005: 44). While not providing an entirely sufficient understanding of the complexities of the collective factors, SQ can help to understand their features and relationship in a specific place and time (Herrmann 2015: 83).

Pamela Abbott and colleagues (2016) suggest that there is no model “decent society”: all are lacking in something whether that be full enfranchisement of the populace, political corruption, marginalized and excluded populations, and/or a lack of cohesion; all societies are continually developing with some exhibiting greater levels of SQ than others. However, even within nations that may, at first glance, possess high levels of SQ, it is possible to see complex patterning of differential levels of SQ within communities with some lacking along multiple measures. This was evident in many of the interviews that this article draws on, and we argue that Stoke-on-Trent is archetypal in this regard inasmuch as it is lacking in all four key indicators.

Methodology

Eighteen men took part in the original study on which this article draws, each participating in at least two in-depth qualitative interviews lasting between 30 minutes and three hours. Senses of

space, place, and belonging were significant in the participants' narratives, so triangulation activities involving visiting significant locations, or viewing them on maps and online where visits were impractical, were also undertaken. This was done with the aim of both improving the quality of the data but also to help better situate their experiences and elicit hidden details that would otherwise not have been shared and thus helped to enrich the depth of detail that informed the wider project and subsequent analyses (King and Horrocks 2010). These in-depth interviews help to chart the changing circumstances and perceptions of participants over this period and belie emerging concerns, beliefs, practices, and attitudes about core constitutional factors (personal human security, social recognition, social responsiveness, and personal (human) capacity) of which they are deprived because of the nature, and lack of, conditional factors and which were to go on to underpin the significant Brexit vote in this locality in 2016.

The “Brexit” Quandary

At the heart of the “Staffordshire Potteries,” during its heyday, Stoke-on-Trent was home to much of the UK ceramics industry and developed a global reputation for its earthenware and bone china ranges thanks to the likes of Spode, Portmeirion, and Wedgwood. It was also home to a host of other industries key the areas development including coal and steelworks, their own fortunes often intertwined with the pottery industry. The city's population went into ongoing decline following its peak in 1931 (OHPR 1931: 2) and has only recently begun to recover (ONS 2012). While it has experienced growing levels of migration, at the 2011 census the city still had a higher-than-average proportion of white British residents—more than 88 percent compared with a national average of 80.5 percent (Stoke-on-Trent City Council 2014)—rising to more than 95 percent in some communities, including Bentilee, one of the city's most disadvantaged

communities (CDRC 2015). As will be explored later, this is highly significant in the formation of some of the experiences of several of the men interviewed and the narratives that they create.

The industries that formerly dominated the skyline have been in long-term decline, and now only a handful of pot banks remain. The coal mines and steelworks have all closed, leaving a patchwork of former close-knit mining and steel communities across Stoke. The ceramics industry, which in the mid-twentieth century employed almost 100,000 people in Stoke, only accounted for 9,000 jobs by 2010, having shed 20,000 jobs in the first decade of the twenty-first century alone (Lowenstein 2017). Echoing changes that have occurred across former industrial heartlands across the UK, there has been a corresponding decline in the labor opportunities for many in the city. These elements combined, along with poor educational and health outcomes frequently associated with postindustrial cities struggling to reinvent themselves, have seen Stoke regularly finding itself among the most deprived in the country, being ranked joint 13th most deprived in the most recent Indices of Multiple Deprivation (DCLG 2015). In parallel to these changes (again echoing changes across many deindustrialized areas across the UK) Stoke, once a stronghold for the Labour Party in both national and local politics, now displays a much more fragmented political identity.

Since New Labour's election in 1997, there has been an ongoing decline in the proportion of people voting across the city, with Labour experiencing a prolonged decline in its vote share on a local and national level in one of its former industrial heartlands. The far-right British National Party (BNP) won several council seats in Stoke in 2009, and although there are now no BNP councilors in Stoke, the administration of the local City Council is (at the time of writing) in the hands of a coalition of Conservatives and independents (including several former BNP councilors) with Labour, the largest party in the chamber, sitting in opposition. In the 2017

general election, Labour lost one of the three Stoke Parliamentary constituencies—Stoke South—to the Conservatives after an 80-year dominance of all Stoke Parliamentary seats. This systemic socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and sociocultural fragmentation and crisis in Stoke echoes events in many similar communities, and this trend has been documented widely (see, e.g., Charlesworth 2000; Mahoney and Kearon 2017; Winlow et al. 2017) and is indicative of the fact that the city and its population are sorely lacking across all measures of SQ—in particular, the requisite conditional factors.

A key issue underpinning the city’s decline is a lack of investment from private or public bodies. Like many other Northern, Midland, and Welsh postindustrial conurbations, the EU is one of the only reliable sources of funding that Stoke-on-Trent and the wider Staffordshire and North Staffordshire regions have been able to draw on. The area has benefited from significant investment from the ERDF with the 2014–2020 phase of ERDF support alone being worth in the region of £83 million for the wider Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (Stoke-on-Trent & Staffordshire Enterprise Partnership 2018). In contrast, the city has endured substantial budget and funding cuts under the coalition and subsequent Conservative governments’ austerity programs. For instance, its Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder, Renew North Staffordshire, which was intended to regenerate large swathes of the city’s often poor-quality, squalid Victorian housing stock, was canceled in 2010, leaving derelict houses across the city, and the City Council will have seen “savings” of more than £200 million made between 2010 and 2020 when we leave the EU (Stoke-on-Trent City Council 2017). These experiences are not isolated, and, like other deprived postindustrial cities in England and Wales, the populace still overwhelmingly voted to leave the EU—the very source of the limited economic support that has come in to the region, and the city of Stoke-on-Trent was one of the leaders of the Brexit

charge.

The result of all this was more than 65 percent of Stoke-on-Trent's voting age population turning out to vote, of which 69.4 percent voted for Brexit; by comparison, Stoke-on-Trent Central had just 38.2 percent of eligible voters casting their vote in a high-profile, nationally covered parliamentary by-election in February 2017 (Batchelor 2017). Thus, when comparing electoral turnout for the EU vote with other elections, the opportunity to vote against EU membership appeared to galvanize the electorate, challenging the caricature of the working classes as being a lazy, dysfunctional, feckless, disengaged mass. Subsequent attempts to explain this apparent quandary have arguably been dominated by simplistic and superficial popular analysis.

There is some growing recognition of the fact that there are more complex, deep-rooted, structural challenges experienced in deprived, formerly (and in some instances still) proud postindustrial communities that have challenged the worldview of those who live and are brought up in them (see, e.g., Corbett 2016; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Peston 2017; Winlow et al. 2017). Many retain conventional aspirations that are rooted in a meritocratic ideal (see Mahoney and Kearon 2017) but lack the constitutional¹ tools and opportunities to achieve them. Their experiences are compounded by failed promises by politicians who are seen as favoring other groups, particularly migrants, over their own needs and experiences. This is not a new phenomenon, and the anger, sense of abandonment, and despair that is prefigured in the interviews conducted in Stoke before the Brexit vote has arguably been growing throughout the period of systemic deindustrialization and rapid decline of the social democratic consensus in local and national governance, as is exhibited throughout the narratives we draw on here.

Analysis

The prolonged decline in the city's fortunes and an inability to reinvent itself have had a profound impact on the lives and expectations of many of its residents, and these in turn manifested themselves, at least in part, in the collective vote to leave the European Union on what we now know to be 29 March 2019. This broader, systemic crisis is reflected at the level of personal biography and individual perceptions and attitudes in a series of longitudinal interviews with unemployed and precariously employed working-class men in Stoke-on-Trent. We have documented elsewhere some of the coping strategies that these young men developed to try to mitigate the worst excesses of their exclusion from mainstream society, including turning to petty crime and the formation of new forms of individual and collective self-identity and identification to help them "get by" (see Mahoney and Kearon 2017). A key issue underpinning people's experiences in the city—particularly those with little or no education, and patchy employment records at best—is their ability to engage effectively in the workforce. Among those who took part in the original study, all had contemporary experiences of unemployment and the challenges that it posed to them emotionally, physically, and mentally, as well as to their engagement with their support networks and the wider community.

Mohammed, for instance, had a particularly complicated narrative. He was not British Asian but rather a 23-year-old white, working-class man who chose his own pseudonym with the express intention of seeking to draw attention to racial tensions in both his own views and the wider city. He had struggled to gain secure, meaningful work, something fundamental to not just his economic security but also his ability to participate fully and effectively in society or to "actively influence the immediate and more distant [societal] and physical environment in which [he lives]" (Abbott et al. 2016: 72). This is not uncommon; the transference of risk onto

individuals under the neoliberal socioeconomic model has seen a rise in flexible working practices and a loss of secure and stable work (Braverman [1974]1998; Standing 2011). Those who lack the skills to gain secure, meaningful work because of an inability to adapt to the changing nature of work in contemporary society find themselves further marginalized through a reliance on the welfare state and the stigma that it carries (Anderson and Guillemard 2005), becoming cast as a passive consumer of state support rather than as an active and empowered member of the community. Mohammed felt disempowered and, while accepting the role of political decisions on his experiences and those of others like him, retained strong views on minority populations, which he sought to legitimize through arguing that they did not understand what it was to be British and lacked respect for British “heritage”:

Dirty bastards, dirty bastards. I don't like their morals. Don't like how they treat people, and then they can go around burning poppies! . . . That's our heritage and you're going burning poppies in front of our fucking dead soldiers! Fuck off! Pisses me off, but they let it go on and on and on and on and on . . . As soon as we let 'em [them] in, we go across there to go and help their country out and they fucking cut our heads off.

(Mohammed, 23)

Mohammed conflates migration, particularly from predominantly Islamic countries, with Islamic fundamentalism, and he was not alone in doing this, although it was not the dominant narrative for many who took part in the study. Rather, wider discussions on migration, including among Mohammed's other remarks, focused on the impact on competition for employment. There was an awareness that high levels of migration were not the fault of the migrant workers, but rather

arose as a result of political decisions:

Mrs. Thatcher, she invested in what they called “the Commonwealth of the People” . . . Foreigners, and we’ve paid for that ever since. And now you look at it, they’re all plowing in. They’re nicking [from] their own, they’re stealing from our kids. (Pickles, 48)

Such views were, however, often further complicated by a grudging respect for migrant workers:

We’re letting all these immigrants in the country as well, and they’re taking all the jobs, you know what I mean? I wouldn’t have to resort to crime. . . . There’s no jobs around because there’s so many immigrants working for fuck all. That is who they employ. And they’re good at it as well! If it was stuck just to English-bred people, no immigration in the country whatsoever, everyone would be on a 30 or 40K [thousand pound] a year job at least. (Spanish, 25)

Like the participants in Simon Winlow and colleagues’ (2017) recent work, the reality of the experiences of these men and others like them is much more complex than the racist caricature that could be drawn from Mohammed’s original remarks. Despite such racial undertones, some of the concerns were legitimate. It has been recognized elsewhere that postindustrial communities have borne the brunt of migration, asylum, and refugee placements in recent years with little state support for either them or the existing population, which has resulted in further competition for work with fractures arising within communities (Corbett 2016; Hacking 2015).

The underlying tensions and divisions in the communities, compounded by a loss of meaningful work and profound sense of disconnectedness have led to some viewing their communities as their own defensible spaces—the divisions in society becoming more pronounced as a result. When asked about his own community, Mohammed stated:

It's pretty much all right. There's a couple of Blacks around here an [and] a couple of Pakis. A Paki at the shop up the top an' a couple of Pakis who live around here—you don't see much of them. There's about three Paki families that live on Bentilee. Blacks are starting emerging over here, yeah . . . they keep themselves to themselves . . . Don't mind the Blacks but, it's just the Pakis. I don't like them. Even the Blacks hate the Pakis. Even the Indians hate Pakis! (Mohammed, 23)

The homogeneity of the community, alongside its traditional working-class roots, has seen the development of strong bonds and ties to the community among residents. Mohammed's mother and friends continued to live on the estate, providing strong informal bonds enabling him to get by. These bonds, which previously tied communities together, are, however, challenged by the atomizing nature of contemporary society. The upshot of this is that there is the development of a sense of melancholic nostalgia as people hark back to a mythical golden age, and this seeps into the narratives of these men. As we have argued elsewhere, “on the one hand [they were] all too conscious of the local collective memories and mythologies of close knit working class communities and the employment that delivered social and economic security as well as a sense of status and place to those communities. On the other hand, they lived a far more fragile and precarious existence” (Mahoney and Kearon 2017: 78).

The development of “bonding capital” (see Leonard 2004; Putnam 2001) has traditionally been identified as a strength of working-class communities, rooting their identity in space and place, yet it can also trap people in their community and circumstances (Abbott et al. 2016). While developing a strong sense of belonging and ability to “get by,” people struggle to develop wider networks and lack the bridging capital to “get on” (see MacDonald et al. 2005). This can result in the development of localized norms and countercultural attitudes (Abbott et al. 2016) that embed people in space and place (see, e.g., Ilan 2011, 2013) and, while helping to deal with the immediate challenges people face, simultaneously weakens the bonds with wider social norms (see Willis 1977).

Alternatively, some can develop nihilistic outlooks on life:

I won't get far in life. I'll just be plodding along til I die to be honest, mate. I mean, you never know, I might win the lottery. You never know. You got more chance of fuckin' . . . well, you've got more chance with the lottery. (Mohammed, 23)

I'm stuck in a rut, I can't get out of it. . . . Most of us on this estate'd say the same thing, there's only one way out of it [intimates blowing his head off with a gun]. That's why half of these on here are on smack. They do it to shut the world out 'cause there's fuck all else there for them anyway. (Pickles, 48)

These attitudes, characterized here by a sense of abandonment and getting “stuck in a rut” and echoed elsewhere, belie a sense that there is little left to live or work for. Some sought to mask this:

I've not really had much motivation, especially the last few weeks 'cause of what I believe's gonna happen on Friday, and it's like, what's the point? Why get a job, why get happy, and then get it all taken away? I know it's a bit of a daft thing. A lot of people don't believe in it and think I'm stupid, but I kinda [kind of] do believe it's gonna happen so kinda ruins any motivation to do anything at the moment. (Hatman, 26)

Hatman was discussing the theory that the world was going to end on 21 December 2012 in line with a Mayan prophecy as we crossed from the end of an aeon. His motivation did not, however, change following this. These nihilistic ideas were ingrained within his psyche. The lack of opportunities to escape the precarious, ontologically, and economically insecure circumstances that dominate the communities of Stoke-on-Trent have left some questioning the point of their existence. In developing such nihilistic beliefs and practices, there becomes little point in deferring gratification for the long term and, as a result, little interest in the risks of longer-term pain, as was the message of "Project Fear" deployed by the Remain campaign in the EU referendum. Indeed, for Nietzsche (1967: 11–18) fear is a normal condition. These developments undermine already-weak bonds between disparate groups in society, with the result being that "there is no solidarity in which there are sterile, unproductive and destructive elements." (33). Bulent Diken (2009: 5) further develops this by drawing attention to the fact that "contemporary society systematically produces 'losers' while, at the same time, depicting this condition as a fate, as one's own fault." Thus, through individualizing failure, the bonds that formerly acted as a foundation for wider solidarities break down, and people become further isolated from societally based relationships. This view is echoed in the work of Charis Kubrin and colleagues

(2006), who examined the political, cultural, and emotional responses of young, urban African American males experiencing significant disadvantage rooted in deindustrialization, a situation that generated significant nihilistic responses, often culminating in suicide.

Pickles shows us that, while he had adopted a nihilistic view on the world that fed through into short-term thinking and propensity to engage in crime and deviance, it would require very little to achieve his aspirations:

I woke up one morning, I'm in that place, my life's so down and low, I thought, 'What have I got to lose?' Because that's the point: I've just answered the question. What have I got to lose anyway? If [only] you had something that was there at the beginning that was worth hanging on to . . . just a nice job that was a safety net and the wages were over two hundred, three hundred pounds a week. (Pickles, 48)

These men are trapped by space and place, and it is of little wonder that nihilistic views become embedded in the psyche. People in such circumstances experience the paradox of being included in their community but excluded from wider decision-making processes; decisions are made on their behalf by those who claim to know better, with the consequences thrust on them. It is of little surprise that there is such a profound disconnect between the experiences and attitudes of people in deprived communities, such as are characterized by those in Stoke-on-Trent, and those of the liberal middle classes and elite.

The remarks, attitudes, and actions above sit in stark contrast to the narratives provided by liberal think tanks, research institutes, many academics, and much of the political establishment that have consistently extolled the virtues of migration (see, e.g., Cameron 2013;

Devlin et al. 2014; Reed and Latorre 2009) and membership of the European Union. Following the opening of UK borders to Accession 8 countries in 2004, there was a significant increase in migration to the UK. This coincided with ongoing decline, worklessness, and deprivation in postindustrial communities, all while the country continued to prosper—at least while prosperity is measured by GDP, the use of which as a measure of progress, has previously been identified as problematic (see Abbott et al. 2016: 8–11; Herrmann 2015, Stiglitz et al. 2009).

Critics argue that GDP is a reductionist measure that assumes continual economic growth is a good thing. It is underpinned by the tacit premise that the benefits of this growth are shared throughout society—something untrue in a neoliberal society and thus something that ignores the subjective experiences of people and the plight of marginalized groups (see also Abbott et al. 2016; Van der Maesen and Walker 2012a). This is exacerbated by a growing body of evidence showing that increasing numbers of people are trapped in in-work poverty (Wright 2018), thereby emphasizing that the type and quality of work, rather than having a job in the first instance, is of utmost significance. Moreover, in measuring societal progress by GDP, effective SQ initiatives are a condition sine qua non to go beyond the restricted socioeconomic and financial policies (Walker 2005). This has compounded the experience of marginalized, precarious, and excluded populations across Europe and, in this instance, within many of the UK's postindustrial urban hubs such as Stoke. By championing immigration as an economic good, politicians from across much of the center-left to center-right have ignored the impact of policy decisions on working-class communities and have created space for “anti-politics” movements to flourish.

There is a clear tension between the view that migration is economically beneficial and an overall good, and the realities faced by these men, which is reflected in their attitudes and

narratives. However, to reduce depictions of these men to those of illiberal, uneducated, racist, white working classes as frequently occurs in much media and political discourse provides an inherently divisive and problematic situation in which the white working classes are constructed as scapegoat and passive dupe. This narrative (that these men themselves are all too aware of) reinforces the sense of disenfranchisement within significant sections of the city's population. This pervasive sense of disenfranchisement from and disillusionment with the political process was profound and deeply embedded with many commenting on the cyclical nature of attacks on the poor, vulnerable, and dispossessed. At the same time, much of the palpable anger among these men was undirected, and it is apparent that there was a lack of an effective outlet through which to express themselves:

I try not to watch like the news, it just pisses me off, like with fuckin' [former British Prime Minister] David Cameron. I hate the bastard! All the stuff, everything he says is just wrong, innit [isn't it]? Any quotes you hear on tele, they're just wrong like that. [Author: Any specific examples?] I can't think of any off me head at the moment but just everything you hear . . . *his view on like poorer people or asylum seekers*, it's just, it's just all wrong, everything you ever hear off him. I'd just rather he were dead. I would. Like, I don't try and have much to do with political shit, but this David Cameron is a dick. (Darren, 23, emphasis added)

This declining trust of the political elite and public institutions, echoed across the general population (Edelman 2018), is symptomatic of a breakdown in trust and social cohesion between individuals and communities (Abbott et al. 2016: 37). There is a perception that there is a lack of

a shared morality or common goals (38) highlighted by Darren's comment on Cameron's views on "poorer people and asylum seekers" and that the elite no longer have the interests of the whole of society at heart.

Darren's inability to articulate specifics as to the source of his anger was not uncommon; one participant, 21-year-old AJ, lacked any real confidence in himself or his opinion, repeatedly saying, "I don't really know what to say anymore" and "I can't get my words out." While this may point toward a lack of formal education (he left school with no formal qualifications at 15), others with similar or lower levels of education were at least able to articulate their sense of anger. Rather, such statements suggest a lack of a "voice" on a personal, local, and national level.

Effective and meaningful representation is necessary to achieve empowerment in a decent society (Abbott et al. 2016), with a lack of voice leading to tensions and division as people feel that their interests are not being considered or advanced. The SQ approach argues that solidarities are fundamental to the human experience and in maintaining bonds between individuals. Historically, unionization was vital in ensuring that exploited working classes were represented in the workplace, providing solidarity and training so that they were better placed to represent themselves and their communities at a local and national level. It also provided significant organizing capacity, but attacks on the labor movement and unions since the 1970s have left them fragmented. As a result, "unemployed and casualized workers, having suffered a blow to their capacity to project themselves into the future . . . are scarcely capable of being mobilized" (Bourdieu 1998: 82–83). They are now even less able to represent themselves and their own interests in a political world dominated by a self-reinforcing elite. SQ approaches, however argue, that we should not just focus on preserving older solidarities such as those

described above that have been under increasing pressure in neoliberal Britain, but rather acknowledge that new solidarities should be found to replace those that are weakening (Beck et al. 2012: 63). Space for alternative groups with populist, divisive messages opens up where new solidarities—meaningful and cohesive alternatives involving effective participation, empowerment, and representation—fail to materialize. Such opportunities have not gone unnoticed by populist “anti-politics” groups, as exhibited by the previously noted rise of the BNP, UKIP, and “independent” groups in the city

These groups have tapped into growing deprivation and disenchantment to develop narratives that apportion blame for the postindustrial decline of the city to migrant groups, established political “elites,” or a combination of the two. Emotive sentiments and narratives surrounding race and migration, which often colored many of the Brexit debates, are well rooted in the data here, with the underlying anger predating even the coalition and Conservative governments’ austerity programs.

Such narratives tap into objectless anxieties fueled by the ontological insecurity experienced by white working-class groups and communities, providing them with a voice and sense of unity and solidarity. Crucially, however, these views are complex and preexisting. Populist messages are not simply internalized and regurgitated, but rather seize an opportunity to exploit the gap created by the apparent abandonment of Labour’s traditional industrial heartlands by New Labour as the party was seen to embrace neoliberalism and globalization. In providing a voice and targeted narrative for those most affected by it, populist groups amplify wider dissatisfaction at the impact of migration and deprivation. Rather than casting unemployment and an inability to “get on” as being a personal failing as per the dominant “meritocratic” discourse, populist groups return to the idea of them being social ills, albeit caused not by the

neoliberal economic model but rather by migrant workers and populations. These groups generate new senses of solidarity and cohesion, but it is not at a national or supranational level (although similar movements exist elsewhere, and in particular throughout Europe). Rather, they create and reinforce “in-groups,” casting those who do not share their values or priorities as stigmatized “out-groups” against which they define themselves (Tyler 2013; Young 1999, 2007). While this may be a politically expedient approach for populist groups to take inasmuch as it enables them to further their own agenda, it ultimately sows discord and division, weakening cohesion and undermining attempts at creating an inclusive society.

Such an approach fails to tackle the real problems surrounding the ever more precarious nature of the low-skilled work that many of these men are relegated to. They do not possess the qualifications to advance into more secure, better-paid roles, and the service industries do not offer the sense of purpose and well-being that they seek. The threat of further automation looms in the background, and it is the low and semiskilled in society most at risk. At present, it is unclear as to where Brexit will take us, not least because at the time of writing there is no clear vision of Brexit. Migrants, travelers, and marginalized working-class elements of the population have historically found themselves excluded from societally based relationships and cast as abject outsiders and still do (Tyler 2013). What remains to be seen is who will be viewed as the next scapegoat should the prophesized return to the golden ages of old fail to materialize.

Conclusion

In many respects, the arguments outlined in this article are critically engaging with the fact that many journalists, pundits, politicians, and other commentators on the state of the former industrial heartlands of Britain don't really know how to conceptualize the “left behind,”

marginalized, and disaffected communities that have informed our work here. For many years, they have been regarded as passive and disengaged: if only they would engage with the democratic process, turn out and vote more, then they would be able to exercise more control over their situation. But when they did turn out to vote in large numbers, they voted for Brexit. In the process, they have transitioned from being regarded as too disengaged, lazy, and feckless, to becoming passive dupes of Brexit propaganda who cannot be trusted to evaluate the evidence put to them and come up with the reasoned, rational conclusion that the only sensible choice was to remain in the European Union. Both sets of depictions are wholly problematic inasmuch as they remove any suggestion of such voters being rational, agentic actors and, furthermore, ignore the subjective realities faced by those living in deprived, postindustrial communities across the UK. It is with this in mind that we have drawn on SQT to develop a more nuanced and critical understanding of some of the factors that underpinned the vote to leave the EU.

“Social Quality provides a complex methodological and analytical framework for describing and explaining the quality of society, explicitly challenging the view that economic growth alone inevitably results in a higher quality of [daily] life for individuals and societies” (Abbott and Wallace 2012: 155). We suggest that in SQ, subjective satisfaction is a key element of the quality of societal circumstances and provides the basis for understanding the constitution of a livable society. This subjective satisfaction will be highly influenced by the state of affairs of the conditional factors of social quality in a complex interrelationship that we have tried to summarize in Figure 1.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Figure 1: The “square” of social quality—systemic absences in Stoke (adapted from Abbott and

Wallace 2012).

The experiences of our research participants demonstrate a relative underdevelopment of the four conditional factors, and because of this, people in Stoke-on-Trent lack the means to fully realize the constitutive factors of personal security, social recognition, social responsiveness, and personal capacity. This in turn prevents the future fulfillment of the conditions of social quality within the city without broader societal level changes, which should be predicated on fulfilling the normative factors of social justice, solidarity, equal value, and human dignity. We suggest, therefore, that the conditions of SQ in Stoke-on-Trent played at least some role in people's decision to vote to Leave the European Union, and this has implications for the social quality architecture (Beck et al. 2012).

As indicated in Figure 1, the ingrained deprivation and decline experienced within towns and cities like Stoke-on-Trent means that there are consistently low levels of economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment—core conditional components of a “decent society.” Underpinned by chronic economic insecurity, there is considerable fragmentation of identities on a geographical level as the city continues to struggle to reinvent itself following prolonged postindustrial decline, as well as on an individual level among those who find themselves living in deprived, marginalized communities. The result is growing personal insecurity as people struggle to get on in neoliberal Britain and no longer feel the same sense of collectivity and belonging, while populist groups capitalize on this to sow further discord, weakening social cohesion in the process. The offer of populist groups that saw the city's population as “resentful, angry, looking for a new politics” (Barton 2009) provided an articulable narrative and somebody to blame. This made for a powerful, uniting force and, for the

first time in a long time, a voice on the national level as they provide a sense of both social recognition and solidarity. The space for these groups and the powerful sense of imagined cohesion that their messages offer was forged in the ongoing decline, deprivation, and marginalization that communities, epitomized by Stoke-on-Trent, face.

ERDF and related EU funding helped to a limited extent to plug one of these holes—economic insecurity, however, due to wider policy failings in the UK that funding has done little more than papering over the cracks. The fact that the other three cornerstones of the conditional factors of SQ are increasingly attenuated in Stoke-on-Trent has seen a rise in divisions and a perception among much of the city’s population that their needs are, and will continue to go, unmet by an out-of-touch political elite who do not fully understand the ramifications of their actions on the population of the city and areas like it.

The problematic nature of conditional factors, as demonstrated throughout this article, mean that future aspirations for self-realization are constrained by the circumstances faced in the present. For people in such a situation, the referendum on leaving the European Union on 23 June 2016 provided a chance to have their say on something that had the potential to attract real change. Their decision was not motivated solely by racism, ignorance, and a lack of critical faculties as has been suggested elsewhere. Nor was it solely motivated by a desire to bloody the nose of an out-of-touch elite, although as has subsequently been seen there have been significant ramifications from the vote (not least for David Cameron, who stood down the day after the vote, or former Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, who was unceremoniously removed from office by the next Prime Minister Teresa May). Rather, they were, for the first time in decades, able to have a say in the direction of the country’s political future. They felt empowered to “take back control,” which in turn provided a sense of personal capacity through exercising

their democratic rights in a meaningful way, being actively empowered and engaged in participatory democracy.

The interview narratives discussed here are not used to explain the Brexit vote; they cannot. The referendum was only offered as part of the Conservative Party manifesto in 2015, three years after the last of these narratives was collected. Nor do we seek to excuse the racism that is shared within some of the narratives. Rather, we have sought to show that the conditions underpinning Brexit (including unresponsive and chronically underfunded public institutions on both a local and national level), themselves a manifestation of the distinct lack of SQ in the city, are deeply ingrained in not just the geography of the city but also its people. In a city such as Stoke-on-Trent, which has seen a dramatic erosion in its status and that of its citizens whose experiences are underpinned by a distinct lack of SQ, when confronted with a choice between continuity that further compounds one's marginality, and change that, no matter how unlikely or uncertain, provides a glimmer of hope for a *different* future, it should not be surprising that people chose the latter (Peston 2017).

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Note

ⁱ Cf. Beck et al. 2012. We use “constitutional” here to refer to forms and sources of personal/human/ontological security, sources of social recognition, aspects of social responsiveness, and personal/human capacity to respond to change and challenge.