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# In Brexit's wake: The birth of the left behind

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**Abstract**

This paper addresses the problematisation of the 'left behind' in right wing populist governmental strategies in the aftermath of Brexit. As diverse political actors, journalists and commentators questioned and sought to account for the outcome of the vote, we explore Theresa May's particular contribution, as the left behind came into view as a problem for state rule. We reveal May's shifting and often ambiguous ontology of the left behind, highlighting the manner in which she deploys discourses of globalisation, as she challenges an avaricious and culturally detached business elite, and the state, for their failure to hold business in check and to advance the interests of the left behind. Nonetheless, we argue for the continuing relevance of neoliberal discourse for the way May questions the predicament of the left behind, and reimagines their government. Brexit's wake, we suggest, marks not a radical break with the logic of neoliberal reason that Foucauldians in MOS have explored, but a compromised mutation that brings the state to the fore. Crucially, May's intervention also portends the government of what came to be known as 'culture wars'. On the one hand, the left behind were to be the target object of haphazard schemes for the remediation of the inequalities they experience. On the other, their cultural marginalisation was to be addressed by enrolment in countless cultural wars mobilised by elite political actors. Our paper contributes to the literature by offering a Foucauldian analysis addressing the consequences of Brexit for the marginalised and economically vulnerable.

**Keywords**

Brexit, the left behind, problematisation, neoliberalism, populism, Foucault

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## Introduction

In her opening statement as Prime Minister in July 2016, May (2016a) defined the challenges ahead. She spoke of the plight of the 'left behind' or the 'ordinary working class', terms she used synonymously, who suffered at the hands of powerful elites, global economic forces and immigrants. Pitting a corrupt and self-interested elite against an authentic but abused section of the population, the language is compatible with populist motifs. In this paper, however, we view May's engagement with the notion of the 'left behind' during opening months as a Prime Minister not as a slogan or rhetorical device, but as a problem of government in a Foucauldian sense (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1982; Rose, 1999). More specifically, we ask: what is May's particular manner of deploying the concept of the 'left behind', as a problem and a target of governmental intervention? What are its costs? And what are its historical conditions of possibility?

Moments of 'problematisation', we argue, following Foucault (1984), mark points of break, as phenomena are called into question, framed in a particular way and rendered a problem, with governmental alternatives emerging. As Morrison (2022) shows, the plight of the left behind, as an object of governmental action and intervention was quickly taken up by other political parties, experts, journalists and commentators in the days and months that followed the referendum. Here, we take May's opening months in office to be a decisive moment, as the problem of the left behind entered the domain of state rule. In the years that followed, progress towards the realisation of May's ambitions for addressing the 'injustice' experienced by the left behind would emerge, but in a diminished form, on account of her weakened political position especially after 2017 (Seldon, 2020). But in subsequent years, under the regimes of Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak, political authorities, backed by a range of experts and governing agents, persisted in addressing the predicament of the left behind and working towards its remediation. The aspiration to govern for the benefit of the left behind became a firmly established norm.

If in May's speeches and policy statements in these opening months we see the emergence of a particular mode of dividing, distinguishing and addressing the predicament of a subcategory of the population, the aim here is to analyse its emergence. In the style of a Foucauldian problematisation, we trace the historical conditions of possibility of the contributions of an array of governing authorities, within May's discourse. We analyse her speeches, statements and government consultation documents pertaining to the left behind, their conditions of possibility and the relations and processes that made possible a certain manner of governmental reasoning and action.

We begin by situating our argument in the context of the discussion of Brexit and populism in management and organisation (MOS) studies. As we will see, there has been much discussion of the risks to business of 'right-wing' populism and the need for 'adaptive' measures in response. We take up Bristow and Robinson's (2018) appeal to critical scholars to address the consequences of the 'big politics' of Brexit for the materially disadvantaged and marginalised. We draw inspiration from Gordon's appeal for Foucauldian scholarship to focus on genealogies of the state and the political for new times, rather than the genealogy of the 'little things' of government (Gordon, 2023: 146). In so doing, we seek to go beyond the 'shorthand' or compressed concept of 'right-wing' populism, often favoured in the business strategy and MOS literatures (Bristow and Robinson, 2018; Feldmann and Morgan, 2022). We reveal a shifting and often ambiguous ontology of the left behind, highlighting the manner in which May challenges an avaricious and culturally detached business elite, and the state, for its failure to hold business in check and to advance the interests of the left behind. Nonetheless, we argue for the continuing relevance of neoliberal discourse for the way May questions the predicament of the left behind, and reimagines their government. Brexit's wake, we suggest, marks not a radical break with the logic of neoliberal reason that Foucauldians have done much to explore (Munro, 2012; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012), but a

compromised mutation that brings the state to the fore. Contributing to Foucauldian debates, we comment on an unacknowledged debt to the German ordoliberals, so called German neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008; Munro, 2012), as May appeared to challenge the deficits and deficiencies in the regulatory, social and moral conditions of functioning of market relationships from the point of view of the left behind. But we also suggest a tension with an ad hoc, interventionist, or 'post-ordoliberal' aspect to May's efforts to nurture competitive conditions. Business, for all the disparagement and marginalisation during and in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, played a prominent role in subsequent months (Berry, 2022; Cerny, 2016). The language of 'growth' may be distinctive but the 'governmentalization' of economic inequality and regional disadvantage, we conclude, remains relevant to a Labour Party that views state intervention as essential for market optimisation. Crucially, however, through May's early interventions on behalf of the left behind, we see the emergence of 'culture wars' in a hybrid scheme of governmental action and intervention (Bevir, 2016).

## Populism and the EU referendum in organisation and management studies

It is commonplace in the existing literature to associate Brexit with a recent, 'right-wing' populist upsurge in the global north west (Bristow and Robinson, 2018; Feldmann and Morgan, 2022). MOS scholars have responded to these developments in differing ways, exploring the conditions and consequences of the populist moment. Definitions of populism generally refer to a set of motifs, articulated with varied forms of political discourse, that always imply an antagonistic boundary between the true people and their elite enemies (De Cleen et al., 2018; Laclau, 2005). The grammatical subject of populist statements claims the right to represent the interests, values and aspirations of the people. Bristow and Robinson (2018) therefore define but one mode of deploying populist motifs when they describe 'right-wing' populism as concerned with the preservation of material and cultural heritage, and characterised by demagoguery and condemnation of self-interested elites, and other 'enemies of the people'.

In addressing the consequences of populism, the focus has been on the consequences for business and business leaders of 'regime uncertainty' associated with populism's contemporary 'right-wing' variant (Feldmann and Morgan, 2022; Rodrik, 2021). With national interests prioritised in matters of economic policy, business commonly experiences new barriers to trade and the international movement of labour. Multinational enterprises (MNEs) may be at particular risk of preferential action in favour of domestic firms, retaliation by host governments, or being cast as unpatriotic (Hartwell et al., 2024; Sallai et al., 2024). With the disparagement of bureaucrats, public officials and the judiciary as themselves elements of an elite establishment comes uncertainty in policy formation (Devinney and Hartwell, 2020; Feldmann and Morgan, 2022). With populist politicians in government, the 'quiet' politics of informal discussion and advocacy over policy with political actors becomes increasingly unavailable to business elites (Culpepper, 2021; Devinney and Hartwell, 2020).

If for business 'right-wing' populism is suggestive of an array of risks, managing risk is understood to require an adaptive response: forecasting political conditions and the taking of preventive action. Mitigating risk can take the form of coordinated campaigning in favour of free trade, firm level lobbying of national leaders, or new approaches to corporate social responsibility (Blake et al., 2024). But in Britain and the United States, the fragmentation of business as a collective actor, occasioned by differing business size and strategy, as well as the decline of sector wide bargaining, has undermined the potential for concerted action. The example of Brexit revealed

markedly different priorities for enterprise rendering business a marginal force in the referendum campaign, and in subsequent negotiations (Feldmann and Morgan, 2022; Mizruchi, 2013; Morgan and Ibsen, 2021).

Contemporary populism – as a mode of government – is therefore commonly represented as productive of business risk. Crouch (2004) analyses a mode of post-democracy, characteristic of neoliberal regimes of public administration and involving the extension of the influence of representatives of corporate interests into the offices of government. Under a populist regime, business ascendancy of this kind is threatened. A radical shift in national political regimes is implied for which, in practice, organisational scholars, as much as senior executives, have been largely unprepared – with scholars blindsided by analytical weakness, an effect of their indifference to the consequences of formal political processes (Devinney and Hartwell, 2020).

In the field of management and organization studies, Bristow and Robinson (2018) make a related point, calling for a critical examination of the 'political performativity' of the referendum and its consequences for the marginalised (Cabantous et al., 2016). Such an approach would engage not only with 'big politics' but also the organisation of Brexit itself and its consequences for the subjectivity and identity of organisational actors. Accordingly, Kerr and Śliwa (2020) view the referendum as a moment of crisis at multiple social levels, arguing for an analysis that would bring to light its political, personal and organisational ramifications. Reflecting on the organisation of Brexit, Kerr et al. (2024) locate support for the leave vote within a longer history of populist revolt: different forms of political rebellion over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, all sharing a common notion of national British exceptionalism, and the need to defend the nation – and the 'true British people' – against their enemies. But in Kerr et al.'s (2024) analysis, interest focuses on the symbolic violence of the 'vote leave' campaign and its reliance on the contributions of a host of organisational experts. Business management is therefore directly implicated in the ascendancy of the leave campaign, just as it was in the cases of Trump, with his self-presentation in the media as a business winner (Mollan and Geesin, 2020), and Bolsonaro, enabled by business funded think-tanks (Barros and Wanderley, 2020).

For Grey (2021), now an influential public critic, the ambiguities of the leave campaign have had wide ranging consequences for British politics and society. What has made the outcome divisive for politics and social relations, he argues, has been the seemingly constant search for external or internal 'saboteurs', responsible for the failure of Brexit to deliver on the (contradictory) outcomes sought from it. Social relations and politics, on this interpretation, have been marked by a style of political discourse which casts the self-serving and disingenuous elite and their allies as the betrayers of the 'pure people'.

Bristow and Robinson (2018) highlight a resemblance between critiques advanced by critical scholars and the populist politics of the vote leave campaign: both have called into question the problem of corrupt and self-serving business elites and the consequences of globalisation for work and employment. Critics therefore appear vulnerable to their work being used in ways they would not want, augmenting social division and the racialised politics of Brexit (Bristow and Robinson, 2018; Shilliam, 2018). To remedy potential misuses, Bristow and Robinson recommend that critics seize the opportunity afforded by a moment of instability and intensify engagement in public debate. Critics should expose forms of domination, exclusion and inequality in an always reflexive practice of critique. They call for an affirmative, caring but politically pragmatic version of critique that reaches out to a wider public – comparable to the critical performativity favoured by others (Spicer et al., 2016). Similarly, Hensmans and van Bommel (2020) reflect on the political potential of the referendum for critics to mobilise popular ressentiment against elite institutions in Europe and Britain by exploring new and politically persuasive moral categories of organising.

The significance attached to populist regimes in the global northwest has nonetheless been subject to criticism. For Masood and Nisar (2020), critical scholars imply a new pathology and unreason impacting western business and society. But in neglecting the global southeast, they suggest, critics have obscured a similar cultural shift in the latter, implying an always already pathologised, uncivilised and infantilised region, thereby reproducing the terms of orientalist discourse (Saïd, 1978). Others have suggested a related 'orientalising' tendency in analyses of the Brexit vote as an expression of discontent among the marginal and economically vulnerable. Hensmans and van Bommel (2020: 379), for example, refer to the 'deep felt left behind sentiments' expressed not only in the referendum vote but reflected in wider political changes in several European states. For some, such arguments amount to an 'othering' of a 'backward' and 'irrational' working class (Harding, 2018; Mckenzie, 2017).

The widely held notion that the outcome of the referendum is best explained as a manifestation of discontent by the economically vulnerable has been subject to questioning (Ashcroft, 2016), as the evidence is open to interpretation (Clarke, 2023). Dorling (2016), for example, argues that the outcome was wrongly attributed to the working class in northern England. The typical leave voter, he suggests, was white, middle class and living in the south of England, with the county of Essex being 'the capital of Brexit' (Dorling, 2016: 37). The leave campaign, he argues, was won primarily by persuading very large numbers of people in southern middle England that membership of the EU was 'terrible for them, their children and their grandchildren' (Dorling, 2016: 38).

Rather than continue this contentious debate, we propose here to address a different problem. We share Bristow and Robinson's (2018) interest in both the 'big politics' of Brexit and its consequences for the marginalised and economically vulnerable. But our attention turns to the question of how the left behind as a subcategory of the population, came to be defined as a problem and a target for intervention, at the level of the state. We therefore pursue a distinctive path, seeking to frame the left behind, not as a mere slogan or rhetorical device, but as a problem of government in a Foucauldian sense (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1982; Rose, 1999).

## Governing the left behind

The term 'government', as we use it here, derives from Foucault's (2007) late interest in the government of populations, and the groups and collective actors of which a population is comprised. Evoking an early modern concept, the term also implies a diversity of powers and governing authorities which seek to regulate the subject's space of freedom – a tendency which, according to Foucault and the contemporary analysts of governmentality, has tended to grow and multiply in modern liberal society, going beyond the state to include forms of 'self' and community government (Dean, 2010; Rose, 1999). An analytic of government, Dean (2010) argues, addresses the discursive character of 'rule', the language that authorities and experts use to specify the attributes, capacities and statuses of the collective and individual actors they aspire to govern. Government is conceived at once as a linguistic or discursive activity bringing objects and entities into being in a given field, as they are defined and classified, and their relations specified one to another. Activities of government and modes of knowledge and expertise are understood to interconnect in diverse ways. Particularly in modern liberal societies, power is commonly exercised through diverse experts laying claim to efficacious competence aiming to advise and advance the well-being of populations, groups and individual actors. But governing also commonly relies on a certain manner of practical programmatic reasoning, a framing of evaluative criteria, ends and objectives, just as it does on practices which monitor, inscribe and record the activity of the governed. Governing in this sense is also a 'technological' activity to the extent that it relies on all manner of technical instruments and procedures in relation to the targets of its

intervention. The problem of government therefore breaks down into an analysis of the authoritative agents, concepts, arguments, programmes and procedures by which rule is enacted and how, through diverse relations and processes, more or less solidified 'regimes of practices' come to be assembled (Dean, 2010).

What came to be known as studies of governmentality, of relevance to MOS, focussed initially on the emergence and consequences of neoliberal or advanced liberal regimes and the generalisation of markets, competition, and enterprising conduct, from the late 1970s onwards (Du Gay, 1996). Such work highlighted the part which multiple agencies of government – a loose alliance of experts, including consultants, business academics and agencies connected to the state – were playing in the formation of apparently new ways of imagining and acting on the productive subject. The recurring theme was 'enterprise', as the competitive business enterprise became the preferred model for any form of institutional organisation and the cultivation of self-responsible, enterprising qualities the preferred norm for productive subjects, managers, indeed all citizens. Without state direction, 'enterprise' was seemingly on the move, spreading throughout the social body, expanding its influence into diverse fields of public policy, the organisation of the state, the workplace and the personal and private spheres, in the expansive, centrifugal manner that Foucault (2008) associated with the so-called Chicago variant of neoliberalism. Through a careful reading of Foucault's lectures, Munro (2012) foregrounded the pre-eminence of 'human capital' and 'marketability' in contemporary expert discourses of work. The normative ideal for the contemporary employee was that of the autonomous and enterprising subject responsible for their own 'investments' in skill and personal advancement, capable of navigating and competing in precarious situations without organisational support (Weiskopf and Munro, 2012).

As Bevir (2016) argues, perhaps the most common line of criticism of accounts of neoliberal governmentality is the monolithic view of regimes of government which they commonly present. The emphasis on centrifugal neoliberal expansion discourages attention to mutation and change as governing authorities encounter dilemmas, unforeseen problems and novel circumstances. Hybridisation in approaches to governing in these problematic circumstances is occluded. A simple example may help to illustrate the point. By the middle years of the 1990s, dilemmas and contradictions in neoliberal 'government' were already encouraging modifications and mutations, as the fostering of 'community' and the need to integrate the fragmented field of public policy interventions came to be viewed as urgent governmental priorities (Rose, 1999). Beyond the field of economic action, other forms of social science now informed the technologies of public policy, especially 'mid-level' sociological theories of social capital (Bevir, 2016: 2), encouraging more hybrid forms of rule. As Colin Gordon, an influential interpreter of Foucault's later lectures, has recently argued we now require genealogies of the state and the political to extend Foucault's interests in neoliberalism for new circumstances, whilst going beyond histories of the 'microscopic level of objects and practices' (Gordon, 2023: 146). Here, we share Gordon's concern with genealogies of 'the political' and the state for new times. Foucauldian studies of the arts of governing brought to the fore the question of the consequences of neoliberal government for individuals, organisations and society, as a political rationality and in terms of its associated technologies of government. They introduced the multiple forces or vectors of power, at state level and beyond, in reproducing an always contested and always evolving rationality. We apply a similar approach to a different era. Hence it is analyses and prescriptions for a section of the population who experience material and subjective deprivation, and their problematic relationship to powerful business and political elites, global economic forces and immigrants, that provides the focus for our study. Following Gordon, such an approach should serve as a compliment to Foucauldian historical investigations of the shifting micro-practices of organisation, such as the career or strategy, which others have presented (McKinlay, 2002, 2013). Following Bevir (2016), on the other hand, this will

be an investigation of the art of governing which attends to hybridity, variation and change. If concepts borrowed from a reading of the later Foucault are to be of help in exploring the emergence of a regime for governing the left behind, care will be taken to avoid generalising and homogenising tendencies at times present in such an approach.

## Methodology

Methodologically, we draw on the Foucauldian practice of problematisation (Koopman, 2013). Problematisations are concerned with occasions of controversy when established ways of conceiving the government of conduct are called into question, and problems of rule are framed in a particular way (Foucault, 2019, see also Dean, 2010; Dean and Barry, 1998; Koopman, 2013; Miller and O'Leary, 1994). The study of problematisations requires an historical investigation not only of the way we characterise the problematic qualities, statuses and attributes of collective and individual actors, but also the manner of their analysis and intimations of remediation (Foucault, 2019: 228). As such, problematisations are concerned to investigate the conditions of possibility for our accepted ways of framing how 'government' should be understood and practised. Focussing on moments of rupture, the aim is to reveal the point at which a form of (problematic) governmental commonsense first takes shape.

Accordingly, it is to the opening 5 months of May's period in office that we turn, and the development of what she termed her 'philosophy of government' (May, 2016e). We consider May's speeches and statements in which she addresses the issue of the left behind during this period, analysing the concepts she deploys and their relations and integration both within and across May's (2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2016f) different speeches. We also consider the contributions of an array of governing authorities: advisors loosely linked to the state, 'impactful' academic publications, consultation 'Green Papers', thinktank contributions as well as relevant secondary sources, in so far as they form part of the intricate historical setting that allowed the left behind to emerge and enter the domain of state rule at a particular historical moment. By repeatedly reading and analysing these sources, key concepts and recurring patterns were identified. But investigations of this kind entail scanning the historical field for the sites and relations of power and knowledge that have been instrumental in bringing the left behind into being, identifying an archive of connected statements that have enabled a particular way of defining and explaining their problematic attributes and characteristics to emerge. It also means engaging with the record of history for connected statements concerning remedies for their predicament. History of this kind gives attention to forms of authoritative evidence and knowledge, as well as to moral argument in furnishing forms of evaluation of the left behind.

The aim is to reveal the relations and processes by which May's politically consequential version of the left behind first emerged. In attempting such an historical investigation, we seek to give nuance and distinctive form to an instance of so-called 'right-wing' populism as a mode of governing. Notwithstanding the influence of Laclau (2005), the term has at times been used in MOS in a way that suggests a fixed and stable meaning, rather than a mode of discourse that is constantly being remade, with variant forms emerging over time (Bristow and Robinson, 2018). To speak of 'right' and 'left', we assume here, is to deploy a 'shorthand' concept in need of further specification of its singular form and conditions of possibility. To problematise, we assume after Foucault, is also to seek to open up for critical questioning the controversies that have shaped present practices (Foucault, 1982; Koopman, 2013). Problematisations in this sense seek not only to enumerate risks and costs but also, in showing the contingent, fragile processes by which regimes of practice first took shape, to intimate the possibility of a way out of our predicament.

## Theresa May – problematising the attributes of the left behind

According to Martin et al. (2021), the term 'left behind' has a long history in the field of migration studies and the study of developing economies. The same authors note a proliferation of uses for the word. By the 2010s, as Morrison (2022) shows, academics and thinktank intellectuals were beginning to use the term to characterise sections of the British population who experienced either an ingrained pattern of economic inequality (Beatty et al., 2011), political neglect by the major political parties (Griffith and Glenn, 2014) or a sense of cultural loss and threat to their sense of national identity (Morrison, 2022).

In the years following the referendum, Morrison (2022) shows how the idea of a collective actor subject to an admixture of deprivations, leading to a felt sense of loss, became dominant in discourses of the left behind, as diverse commentators – politicians, academics, journalists and media commentators – sought to account for its outcome. There were nonetheless markedly different ways of inflecting each of the economistic, political, and cultural variants of the discourse, and frequently a permeable boundary between each. For those on the political left, economistic interpretations predominated but in different forms, as they called into question and sought measures for remedying the effects of recent Government policies, as in austerity policies, or the longer-term effects of Conservative led deindustrialisation and globalisation (Morrison, 2022). Advocates of Brexit on the left, so called 'Lexiters', argued that such conditions, combined with the commitment of the European Union to the free movement of capital and goods, exacerbated the situation of the left behind (Elliott and Atkinson, 2016; Embery, 2021). With May's intervention, however, the left behind entered the field of state rule (May, 2016a). It is the left behind – or those she terms the 'ordinary working class' (May, 2016a), for the two terms are used synonymously at this point – that May addresses in her opening statement as Prime Minister. She acknowledges other 'burning injustices' (May, 2016a, 2016e) – the treatment of minorities in the criminal justice system, gender discrimination in respect of pay, and in the care of mental health. But it is to the left behind that May claims she wishes to speak 'directly' in her opening address. If other 'injustices' are known and understood, if not necessarily effectively managed, it is the hitherto neglected left behind that May claims she will represent, as she professes her understanding of their predicament. All that is opaque in the outcome of the referendum (Grey, 2021) is clear on May's interpretation: the left behind have 'spoken' through the act of voting, and she will act on their behalf, possessed with a deeper truth about their underlying needs and wants. Crucial to this attempted ventriloquism is May's performed persona of an 'ordinary', dutiful public servant – of humble origins, the child of an Anglican vicar – who understands the 'hidden disadvantaged', by virtue of her own background (Atkins and Gaffney, 2020). For the left behind, it is May who should be trusted to defend their interests. Where other members of the 'political class' act in the interests of the 'privileged few', May would not (May, 2016a).

Invoking the people and the elites and their antagonistic relationship, and speaking in the name of the former, May's speeches and statements took a recognisably populist form (May, 2016a, 2016e). This was a language, some have suggested, that both she and her immediate advisors – including Nick Timothy, her closest advisor and speech writer – had difficulty in mastering (Feldmann and Morgan, 2022; Stefanowitsch, 2019). But May offered an interpretation of the predicament of the left behind. Their experience, as we will see, was one marked by multiple, or overdetermined, forms of deprivation, political neglect and varied forms of elite mistreatment.

From the outset, May presented the left behind as vulnerable to everyday economic shocks, from job insecurity, to stagnating pay and the rising cost of living. The left behind, with their 'hidden disadvantage' were subjects living on the edge, 'just managing' in a life of permanent struggle. For May, the left behind generally referred to a group, albeit in a relatively imprecise way

– for tactical, political reasons according to Cowley and Kavangh (2018). But there are shifts in meaning over time. In her second intervention, when she addresses the theme of the great meritocracy, she adds a wage range to the descriptors: 'earning between £19,000, and £21,000' (May, 2016b). There are also moments in these early months when May gives the concept an additional spatial inflexion, gesturing towards a place-based problem of inequality affecting 'left behind places', to which Conservatives would claim to attach more significance in later years (May, 2016c). Just managing could mean not being on the property ladder or not being able to pay the mortgage (May, 2016a, 2016e). Consistently, however, May shows little sense of the manner in which inequalities combine and interact. As others have argued, there is an exclusionary politics at work in May's deployment of the left behind as she elevates the inequality they experience over injustices of race and gender. The left behind are by implication male and racialized as white (Bhambra, 2017; Shilliam, 2018).

## Globalisation and the birth of the left behind

We turn now to May's representation of the conditions and causes of the predicament of the left behind and how it came to take shape. Speaking at the Lord Mayor's banquet, May presented a perspective on the consequences of globalisation (May, 2016d). On the one hand, economic integration brought choice, promoted wealth and opportunity among states. It provided a system of rules that enabled trade and harmonised international relations. But it also produced less benign effects in the west, especially on wages and security at work for particular groups. If, as signalled by the referendum and the recent presidential election in the United States, 'change was in the air', the political consequences of 'globalisation and liberalism' appeared to be an essential 'driver' of the changing mood, especially among the left behind. Against a background of rising support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), immigration had been at the forefront of May's concerns as a Minister after 2010 (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). The fashioning of a 'hostile environment' for irregular immigrants, reliant on the 'at a distance' regulatory action of employers, banks and landlords, and changes to work and settlement rights, was designed to foster 'community cohesion' and relieve pressure on jobs and services (May, 2012). In articulating the predicament of the left behind, May was framing the 'problem' of immigration in a different way.

Her arguments at this time need to be understood in the context of an influential sociologically informed discourse, fusing economic, political and social conditions in the representation of change across Europe (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). The effects of increasing trade with the so-called Global South on the wages of workers in the West first became a problem for empirical investigation among labour market analysts in the 1970s (Cheh, 1974). By the early 1990s, however, analysts were drawing attention to political repercussions (Kapstein, 2000). Globalisation was producing economic 'winners' and 'losers', with shortfalls in skills, education and mobility preventing the 'losers' from flourishing. Nevertheless the 'losers' in several nation states – from parts of East Asia, to the United States and Europe, and especially France – were now 'fighting back' (Rodrik, 1997), in a political struggle in which the radical right appeared to be gaining advantage.

For some, however, these arguments were in need of serious qualification (Betz, 1993; Betz and Meret, 2013). New political formations in Western states needed to be understood in the context of changing economic *and* political conditions. If parties of the radical right had made political gains, especially among unskilled workers and the lower middle classes fearful of job loss, wage compression and immigration, the political tactics of the left needed to be considered. The left had in effect failed to address the concerns of their core support leaving them vulnerable to a new populist politics on the radical right (Betz, 1993).

Returning to the same theme years later, Betz and Meret (2013) commented on the strengthening of radical right parties from the later 1990s and the early years of the new millennium. By now the support of workers had been mobilised to a degree that these parties had become their de facto representatives in several European states. The political parties of the left had in effect betrayed their traditional support, abandoning socialism in favour of neoliberalism and policies inspired by the identity and anti-authoritarian politics of the 1960s. Those with lower-paid skills, considered to be readily substitutable by immigrant labour, or by labour available abroad, found no resonance in these ideas and had sought a new political home, encouraged by the radical right's new sympathy for state welfare provision.

In Britain, the concept of the 'left behind', modelled in part on accounts of the experience of the radical right across Europe, was popularised by Ford and Goodwin (2014) in their award-winning *Revolt on the Right*. If the European experience could not provide an exact template, for Ford and Goodwin (2014), it could nonetheless provide a broad outline of the direction of change, especially after 2012, with the growing support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), among those they termed the 'left behind'. Considered exceptional for the stability of its party-political system, Britain was unexpectedly experiencing its own 'right-wing' revolt, Ford and Goodwin argued, overdetermined by economic, political, and cultural conditions. Yet on this interpretation, the deprivations of the left behind in Britain were distinctive. Transcending globalisation, there was the problem of the European Union, widely believed to be the source of hardship and economic insecurity. The left behind were 'losers' in other ways, pessimistic in their attitudes in the aftermath of the financial crisis, concerned about its effects on wages and employment security. Political conditions were also distinct. There were broader criticisms of the 'political class' in Britain: 'betrayal' in the UK implicated all the main political parties, and was linked to electoral tactics favouring the growing middle class. And in Britain there had been no 'insurgency' on the right. The contemporary British version of 'right-wing' radicalism emerged from a schism in the Conservative party between the supporters of Margaret Thatcher, an opponent in her later years of the 'European super state', and pro-European neoliberals (Bale, 2018).

Favell (2021) has commented on a type of academic work, fashionable in our era, that reveals a hunger for the media limelight, commonly combining data science with a mode of writing in the style of media commentary, whilst inclining to party political strategising in the forging of conclusions. Favell interprets Ford and Goodwin's (2014) *Revolt on the Right* as a seminal and highly influential contribution to the genre, for the way it came to shape political discourse in Brexit's wake. Likewise, Seldon (2020) comments on a form of 'class analysis', strikingly similar to Ford and Goodwin, that informed the electoral calculations of May's advisors and the targeting of groups hitherto neglected by Conservatives in the aftermath of the referendum. It is from this analysis of 'Brexit Britain' that much of her representation of the domain to be governed derives and here we have attempted to locate that representation in a longer history of sociological interest in the birth of the radical right in Europe. Nevertheless, the shaping of a set of programmatic governmental ambitions cannot simply be derived from expert analysis of this kind (Dean and Hindess, 1998). As we will see in subsequent sections, May, in association with Nick Timothy, her speechwriter and putative interpreter of the programmatic implications of her Christian devotion to service, both reproduces, extends and modifies the discourse that we have been considering (Prince, 2017; Seldon, 2020).

## Liberalism, the elites and the future of the left behind

Perhaps most obvious of all the modifications to the theory of the left behind's revolt, there is a strikingly 'utopian' aspect to May's appraisal of the opportunities for remedying their predicament.

This emerges at various points in the early months, as we will see, beginning with the presentation of her ideal of the great meritocracy (May, 2016b). But it is perhaps clearest in her speech to an audience of notables, including prominent business leaders, at the Lord Mayor's Banquet (May, 2016f). Here, she presents globalisation as both a profound danger and 'a way out' of the predicament of the left behind, when suitably reconfigured. She speaks of the occasion as a 'national rite' that for the last six centuries had marked: 'the pioneering brilliance of the nation as a champion of free trade' (May, 2016f). Notwithstanding present uncertainty, May offers an image of the future as a time of great promise for an outward looking nation and its people. Freed of the restrictions and burdens of association with the EU, she imagines 'Global Britain' at the centre of an alliance of trading nations.

The idea of reviving the Commonwealth as a trading and political formation, as an alternative to the European Union, had been advanced by elements of UKIP after 2012 and then taken up by Boris Johnson and others in the course of the referendum campaign (Saunders, 2020). Others favoured a narrower version of 'old connections' that could be repurposed in Brexit's wake, with so-called CANZUK, drawing together the old settler colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand as an alternative to the European Union. In other related versions of 'Global Britain', the United States was added to the settler colonies to form an 'Anglosphere', that might form the basis of trade (and other relations). Either way, the argument was that Britain should leverage its historic ties and shared values. May, on the other hand, intimates an expansive version of this thesis: a new configuration of nations, united by culture, political institutions and historical associations, as much as by shared geopolitical goals. Members of the business elite should prepare for a new era, not only demonstrating a new respect for the left behind but making ready for the new competitive challenge of 'Global Britain'. Outside the constraints of the EU, Britain could once again be 'an example to others', 'getting out into the world and doing business with allies old and new', overcoming the risks of globalisation for the benefit of all (May, 2016f).

Making ready for 'global Britain' required attention not just to the effects of globalisation but varied forms of ill treatment experienced by the left behind at the hands of the elites, including the business elite. Here, as May reported to her fellow Conservatives in October 2016, the elites were aided by the forces of the state and the political class, with its favoured 'liberal market' ideology (May, 2016e). The practice of speaking critically about sections of business was a feature of the early years of David Cameron's leadership, as Conservatives pursued a 'counterintuitive' politics designed to break negative stereotypes associated with their party (Bale, 2016). On issues such as the marketing of goods to children Conservatives would, it was claimed, take a firm stand (Cameron, 2006). Returning to the same theme in 2012, Cameron (2012) confirmed what he claimed to be the remarkable achievements that had been made in the field of corporate responsibility. What remained, in his view, was the problem of the ever-expanding levels of executive compensation (Cameron, 2012). The problem had been addressed in the Greenbury (1995) report in respect of the executives of newly privatised industries. May's (2016e) intervention implied that the problem of the rapacious, conspiratorial high-paid executive persisted. Though the law had been amended to require a compulsory annual vote on pay policy and a triannual vote on executive awards in 2013 little had changed. Indeed, new ways of quantifying differentials, disseminated by the High Pay Centre (2015), had dramatised the problem. The elites had not borne the burden of the financial crisis in the same way as 'the ordinary working class', May remarks at the Conservative conference (May, 2016e). At the highest levels of business, those of a similar, elite background, who moved in the same social circles, continued to be responsible for determining each other's pay.

Beyond the question of executive pay, May developed a broader critique of the business elite. In part, the problem lay with the elites imagining themselves to be 'above the law', she told fellow Conservatives (May, 2016e). She refers to topical cases of the time: well-known MNEs, with

senior managers seemingly ‘treating tax laws as an optional extra’, scouring the globe for the most favourable tax jurisdiction. Meanwhile, social media companies provided a platform for terrorist organisation (May, 2016e). Referring to a notorious case in this era, May speaks also of the irresponsibility and un-citizenly actions of a director of a major retailer taking substantial dividends while knowing the company pension scheme was failing (May, 2016e).

In the face of the elite’s abusive behaviour, it is time, May remarks, to fashion an economy where all ‘played by the rules’, ‘that worked for all’, where markets were repaired when they failed (May, 2016e). And May would enhance existing state provision, to the advantage of the left behind. Britain would have an interventionist state but of a non-directive kind, in a manner that detached the notion of ‘industrial strategy’ from its historical association with the support of failing businesses or the picking of business ‘winners’, ideas that had been fashionable in the 1970s (May, 2016e, 2016f). By inference ‘strategy’ in the era of the Coalition had been short term in focus. May’s strategic state, by contrast, would look to the long term, build on national strengths in a consistent way, supporting rather than directing, enabling trade, enhancing skills and research and development, and forging an appropriate tax regime, with support for the regions – government funded but led by business locally (May, 2016e).

Britain’s status as the ‘great meritocracy’ (May, 2016b) would be decisive to success in the new era of Global Britain. Both business and the ‘ordinary working class’ would be made ready for an era of intensified competition, it appeared, in both product and labour markets. Ensuring that the nation ‘advanced on all cylinders’ (May, 2016e), May argued that ‘social justice’ must finally be delivered. Meritocracy was hardly the bogus alibi of neoliberalism of which radical critics complained (Littler, 2017) but the inference of May’s argument was that hitherto the political class had failed to deliver, even if politicians had ‘talked the language of social mobility for years’ (May, 2016c). Notwithstanding the achievements of free schools and the enhancement of academies by her predecessor, not enough had been achieved. A choice over the schooling of children, taken for granted by the affluent, would be extended. Theresa May, competent, capable and trustworthy (Atkins and Gaffney, 2020) would lead a ‘recalibration’ of education in favour of those ‘getting by’ instead of the poorest (May, 2016b). With the expansion of high achieving selective schools and better funding for the regions, Britain would finally be ‘a country where everyone has a chance to go as far as their talent and hard work allow’ (May, 2016b). Away from the workplace, the ‘power of government’ would relieve another impediment to their mobility: ‘affordable homes’ for the left behind, with further measures to support house purchase and encourage the availability of land.

‘Global Britain’ would not only reclaim its political sovereignty and economic independence and ‘take back control’ of its borders, for May (2016a) there was another sense of control at stake: the control of everyday life and the enhancement of seemingly incomplete initiatives in community empowerment, citizen service, and the mutualisation of public services of the Coalition years (Barratt, 2014). This theme had been taken up in the years after Thatcher, in what became known as ‘civic conservatism’, as Conservatives rediscovered what they claimed to be core, but neglected conservative ideas: the value of community and local control (Willetts, 1994; for a later interpretation see Timothy, 2020: 169–194). Burke’s (1790) sense of the social obligations and duties of an aristocratic class was given a modern communitarian ‘interpretation’, as the restoration of the ‘natural’ bonds of local community relations and institutions became a matter of personal responsibility for members of communities themselves (Rose, 1999). Importantly, the mutual aid societies and cooperatives of the early 19th century were reimagined as institutions embodying conservative – and British – values of self-help and responsibility, in a history that excluded their relationship to working class struggle (Shilliam, 2018).

The state would therefore be restoring society for the benefit of the left behind, their authentic heritage and ways of life. Here, again, members of the business elite were framed as an opposing

force. May (2016e) speaks of a business elite lacking in respect for their fellow citizens disparaging their values and way of life, owing loyalty primarily to their associates in a wider international elite. The idea of an affluent but detached, geographically mobile grouping of business people and professionals had a longer history: emerging in the debate around globalisation at the turn of the millennium, as the old distinction between 'cosmopolitans' and 'locals' (Gouldner, 1957) was given new meaning, as a resource for those who questioned the consequences of globalisation (Bauman, 2000; Lasch, 1996). Lasch (1996), for example, wrote of a new, interconnected and monied elite, in which business formed a prominent element, detached from common life, without allegiance to their fellow citizens. Later, in the intellectual circles around the Conservatives, David Goodhart (2012), director of the thinktank Policy Exchange, deployed a similar idea, defining the social problems that a post-liberal society should address. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, Scruton (2016) characterised an urban elite, living a life without reference to national boundaries, refusing attachment to their own national identity and sharing a language of their own – the international language of commerce. When May alludes to the business elite as 'citizens of nowhere' she effectively continues this discourse (May, 2016e). And for the contempt they showed fellow Britons, the business elites could be compared to others: the 'activist' lawyers 'haranguing' the 'bravest of the brave', as they pursued claims of human rights abuses against members of the military. Outside the jurisdiction of European law, May said, such actions would cease.

## Discussion

How, then, should we interpret May's particular manner of deploying the concept of the 'left behind', as a problem and a target of governmental intervention? With May's recognition of inequality, market failure and deployment of the concept of class, in the aftermath of the referendum certain commentators imagined that Britain was turning away from neoliberalism and reverting to a traditional form of so called 'one nation' conservatism (Espiet-Kilty, 2023; Hickson et al., 2020). May, therefore, had returned to a form of politics in which state action was judged, in 'one nation' style, according to its capacity to elevate the condition of all, unifying rich and poor for the benefit of social harmony, rather than neoliberal criteria of state limitation, for the benefit of market processes. There are certainly moments when May adopts well-known 'one nation' rhetoric. She signals repetitively that she will govern 'a nation that works for everyone' (May, 2016a, 2016e, 2016f) and affirms a positive role for public powers in ensuring social stability (May, 2016e).

Nevertheless, our argument here will be that neither May nor those who penned her speeches should be regarded as one nation conservatives, even if Nick Timothy laid claim to be an inheritor of 'one nation' state led reformism (Timothy, 2012, 2020). In general, it is the hybridity of May's 'reluctant populism' that stands out (Stefanowitsch, 2019). A constituent element of this, as we have seen, is a particular style of sociological reasoning, heavily reliant on an 'impactful' discourse of the rise of the new right that May extends and modifies (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). We have attempted to explore the prehistory of this representation. But May's 'debts' to other modes of discourse are wide ranging. And, as will become clear, any notion that she somehow 'surpasses' neoliberalism should, in our view, be decisively rejected. Indeed, May, we will argue, exemplifies the hybrid and shifting character of contemporary neoliberal regimes of government which, as we have seen, others have highlighted (Bevir, 2016).

Initially, our focus is on May's portrayal of the attributes and qualities of the left behind. Here, May adapts and modifies familiar traits of the enterprising, neoliberal subject (Du Gay, 1996; Munro, 2012). In what Clarke and Newman (2012) call the 'alchemy of austerity' in the early 2010s, Conservatives and their Coalition allies sought to turn a crisis with origins in the organisation of finance capital into a problem of the size and efficiency of the state, with the welfare

dependent 'underclass' representing the primary difficulty. As others have argued, the politics of welfare acquired a sharply moral character at this time, as the distinction between the welfare dependent 'skivers' and hardworking, responsible, and resilient 'strivers' became a familiar way of distinguishing among the working population (Shilliam, 2018). But with May's concept of the left behind, a new division within this preexisting classification begins to emerge, involving those who are threatened by forces and conditions beyond their control, and 'deserving' of enabling action. Indeed, it is as if a section of the 'strivers' – now named the left behind – had fallen into decline. With the decline in their situation came the risk that they succumb to the 'fatal dependency' of welfare and its character deforming affects. The left behind were therefore to be remade as resilient, neoliberal subjects with the capacity to withstand, thrive and, especially, to compete in the face of new and highly challenging conditions in Brexit's wake (Mckeown and Glenn, 2018).

Above all, the left behind would be prepared for a new era, that of 'Global Britain', outside the European Union. In the aftermath of the referendum there was discussion of the 'imperial nostalgia' of those who supported the case for Brexit, especially among those who championed the idea of 'Global Britain' (Barnett, 2017). But as others have argued the imperial analogy is inexact (Saunders, 2020). The idea of 'Global Britain' self-evidently excludes the institutions of Empire, even if it casts the British, in an implausible way, as the leaders of a new alliance of trading nations, and as a means to the recovery of national greatness. As Saunders (2020) argues, the advocates of 'Global Britain' prefer to exclude the institutions of Empire from their version of British history. Processes of colonisation are suppressed in favour of an image of a small nation 'punching above its weight' (Saunders, 2020: 1044). As May put it, this is a country 'small in size but large in stature' (May, 2016e) – exceptional in the international sphere on account of the stability of its political institutions and the durability and courage of its people, exemplified by the experience of WW2, especially Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain. Such an account owes much to the conservatism of Enoch Powell (Wellings, 2013). However, as an advocate of 'Global Britain', May adds to this national inheritance: the idea of an exemplary nation, exceptional for its intellectual achievements (May, 2016e), and most especially as a buccaneering trading nation, evoking the Elizabethan era of the 16th century, a nation that in the aftermath of the referendum has the potential to realise its true identity (May, 2016e; Saunders, 2020). For May and other Conservative advocates of Global Britain, it is less the recovery of Empire that is at issue, as Britain's self-realisation as an exemplary neoliberal state, freed of association with the EU and joining new and old allies – including the descendants of the settler colonies – in a new regime that would further the pursuit of free trade and competition (see Saunders, 2020). The left behind were thus to be remade to play their part in a new international economic order, whilst, at home, they would bring neoliberal attributes of exemplary self-reliance and initiative to the strengthening of community relations and institutions (May, 2016c).

Neoliberal reason, inflected with a German accent, seems to inform May's position in other ways, as she expands on the role of the state in the remaking of the left behind. Here we expand on our brief reference to Munro's (2012) re-reading of Foucault's later lectures. As Munro shows, for Foucault (2008) what most distinguished ordoliberalism, or so-called 'German neoliberalism', was the value attached to a strong state in imposing markets and competition, and advancing entrepreneurial and competitive norms in a systematic way. Markets were not naturally occurring phenomena but in need of a regulatory state to function or to exist, permanently threatened by a variety of conditions: information asymmetry and externalities, including the self-seeking, monopolistic ambitions of business people (Eucken, 1940). The ordoliberal state engaged in an activity of market policing to secure orderly competition and a social and moral order supportive of an entrepreneurial society, in which all, no matter what their position, experienced the life affirming state of competition. A 'Vitalpolitik' of this kind engaged with the habits and dispositions of all to promote

an entrepreneurial spirit: energetic, self-reliant, competitive and fully integrated into society (Bonefeld, 2012). It also sought to ensure that the principle of economic reciprocity at the heart of capitalist economic organization – the principle of value given in exchange for value received – was preserved (Röpke, 1950).

The evidence presented here points to a practical, programmatic contribution of ordoliberal reason in the British context, augmenting what we know through its textual presentation by Foucault and his interpreters in organisation and management studies (Foucault, 2008; Munro, 2012). Indeed, recent scholarship confirms that British Conservatism has been touched intermittently by ordoliberal ideas. Bonefeld (2012), for example, confirms Keith Joseph's 'lively interest' in the ordoliberals in the Thatcher era. Ordoliberalism provided the inspiration for the development of policy on personal pensions in furtherance of an entrepreneurial social order at the think tank, the Centre for Policy Studies in the 1980s (Davies et al., 2023). More recently, the case for a shift in neoliberal discourse towards a more explicit concern for the regulatory, social and moral conditions of functioning of the market in the aftermath of the financial crisis can be substantiated in a variety of ways (Bonefeld, 2012, 2015). In the style of the ordoliberals, a concern for the 'responsibility' of market actors acquired greater prominence at this time (Eucken, 1940; Kolev and Goldschmitt, 2022; Müller-Armack, 1978; Rüstow, 1981). And after Autumn 2008, it was to regulatory failings that Conservatives and their allies turned in seeking a politically advantageous representation of the crisis. Also critical to the politics of austerity, Bonefeld (2012) argues, was the 'Vitalpolitik' of the 'Big Society', and the attempt, to encourage and nurture civil society and instil new attitudes and habits of self-responsibility in the poor, breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. In due course the capitalisation of the poor – again seemingly echoing ordoliberal concerns (Röpke, 1950) – and a more general promotion of mutuals and cooperatives, especially among public servants (Barratt, 2014), became an important priority in the Coalition's 'Vitalpolitik'.

Far from representing a break with these ideas, Theresa May appeared to share a concern with deficits in the regulatory, social and moral conditions of functioning of market relationships. In prioritising the needs of the market and competition in a new era of 'Global Britain', and in the wake of the referendum, May presents a moralised representation of the responsibilities of business people (May, 2016e). If David Cameron and the Coalition turned to the law and regulation in representing and seeking to correct the excesses of executive rewards, then May follows a similar trajectory, arguing that regulatory action has failed to go far enough in defence of society and workers. Collusion among executives on remuneration committees in publicly quoted companies persists, she argues, leading to the ever growing pay of executives, and the expansion of differentials between the top and other ranks. And the need for regulatory action is broadened. If corporate executives have failed to honour their responsibilities to society and to workers, in the name of the long-term protection of the market, further regulatory intervention is required, including the 'equalisation' of the contractual rights of those engaged in the modern 'flexible economy' (May, 2016e). It is not specific, substantive outcomes that are sought in a 'regimented' way but a certain framing of the rules of the game in the governance of enterprise, with notions of fairness to the fore – including fair compensation for value added for both workers and senior executives.

Much the same can be said of the attention that May gives to the theme of meritocracy, in the hyper competitive economic order she imagines. If the left behind are not to fail in that order and descend to the level of the underclass, they must become highly resilient entrepreneurial purveyors of their own labour power (Du Gay, 1996; Munro, 2012). But for May, they must be educated and endowed with the means to succeed in a competitive labour market, and able to withstand and thrive in the face of the pressures and opportunities of Global Britain, supported by a state that mobilises the powers and resources of government. Those responsible for the education of these future market participant must intensify their efforts to affect a deep ingraining of a spirit of

enterprise, such that the offspring of the left behind deploy their labour power as full participants in the competitive order of a new economic era, whilst enjoying its benefits. Such ideas seem to evoke an ordoliberal variant of neoliberalism. In contrast to other variants of neoliberal government, more familiar in organisation and management studies (Du Gay, 1996; Munro, 2012), in this instance the powers of the state are placed explicitly and self-consciously in the service of promoting markets and supportive social relations.

Nonetheless, as we see it, it would be a mistake to interpret May as an unacknowledged follower of ordoliberalism. There are tensions in her hybrid 'interventionism' in these early months that require consideration (Bevir, 2016). May's dream of the 'great meritocracy' lacks an ordoliberal sense of the need for fair material 'starting conditions' for labour market participants (see Kolev and Goldschmitt, 2022). And for the ordoliberals, there is a moral fabric on which capitalism depends – implying civic mindedness, responsibility for self and others, honesty, fairness, solidarity, neighbourliness, respect for dignity of the other – that can only be built and maintained by the cultivation of non-market social relationships, across an array of social practices, to have real effects. By contrast, there is nothing in May's arguments and critiques to suggest a general turning away from a style of governing that favours the incessant multiplication of institutions and social arrangements modelled on the enterprise form, that owes more to American sources (Foucault, 2008). If May favours an active regulatory and interventionist state, the approach is piecemeal, responding to specific problems affecting a contemporary neoliberal economy.

The idea of an ad hoc, interventionist variant of neoliberalism has been explored by Phillip Cerny (2016) in his concept of a contemporary, 'post ordoliberal' mode of government. In Cerny's view, post-ordoliberalism involves the deployment of state powers and resources for the correction of market failures including pressures to compensate market 'losers', through pro-market and pro-competitive action. Reactive, ad hoc and, at times, characterised by a level of state intrusion that no neoliberal theory would accept in making markets function, Cerny associates post-ordoliberalism with the era of the financial crisis. But May, we would suggest, can be seen to show similar post-ordoliberal tendencies, under new crisis conditions in the aftermath of the referendum.

In the period under review here, such an approach is suggested by the fate of the scheme she announced for the further regulation of corporate governance (DBEIS, 2016; May, 2016c). In the public and media reception of May's conference speech a common assumption was that she was proposing a scheme of stakeholder representation along the lines of German codetermination (Seldon, 2020). But her presentation was ambiguous (May, 2016e). On the one hand, new corporate governance arrangements appeared to be designed to address a problem of fairness: the need to ensure that value given was duly recognised by fair treatment at work and remuneration at all levels. Yet May also spoke of her scheme as one that would render workers and other stakeholders responsible for more effective 'scrutiny' of board level decision making, ensuring its diligence, public spiritedness and entrepreneurialism. In the event, having challenged business for its failure to deliver fair treatment and compensation for workers' contribution, May looked to business for approval for the scheme (Seldon, 2020). Despite the initial exclusion of business following the referendum, which we have seen Feldmann and Morgan (2022) highlight in the international business literature on populism, business influence, on our interpretation, would appear to have gradually 'recovered', at least in the sense of being able to shape government opinion on the new post-Brexit realities in subsequent months. And when business approval was not received, on the grounds that it would encourage collectivism and be harmful to competition, government consultation papers 'clarified' that only a voluntary approach would apply, with the option of either an advisory panel or a non-executive director speaking on behalf of workers (DBEIS, 2016). Good governance was a means to an end of strengthening processes of engagement and facilitating

'effective, entrepreneurial and prudent' management, in the face of the competitive challenges of global Britain (DBEIS, 2016: 10).

By late November 2016 then, the notion of 'fairness' and the idea of an active strategic state, independent of business, was seemingly in decline. In practice, during these months and later, the emergence of a 'strategic state' was limited by May's political weakness, arguments within the Conservative leadership over the direction of policy, with resource constraints to the fore, as well as the complexity of negotiations with the EU. Uncertainty over future relations with the EU limited the establishment of new trading relations. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which May's post-ordoliberal tendency could be said to have had 'productive effects'. In the eras of Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak, the concept of the left behind acquired a predominantly spatial inflexion, largely occluded by May – referring to left behind places. As Berry (2022) argues, ill coordination, under-funding and seemingly contradictory objectives became a pervasive feature of Conservative efforts to remedy the competitiveness of left behind places. None of the schemes designed to address the inequalities experienced by left behind places or remedy strategic industrial weaknesses, ever encompassed a 'significant amount of new public expenditure' (Berry, 2022: 254). They appeared to have little practical benefit for the left behind, given the continuing decline of their incomes in the years of Conservative government after 2016 (Ray-Chaudhuri et al., 2024). Such schemes, Berry (2022) argues, have rarely been strategic, fundamentally flawed by virtue of their reliance on institutional mechanisms dominated by businesses, in key respects the source of the problems of disparity. Again, for all the disparagement of elements of business during and after the referendum by May and others, and its marginal position in the 'quiet politics' of national government in the immediate aftermath of the referendum (Feldmann and Morgan, 2022), business occupied a pre-eminent position in the institutional mechanisms that oversaw such government funded schemes as the 'Towns Fund' and the 'Levelling Up Fund'. Such developments evidently raised familiar questions over democratic accountability, evoking Crouch's (2004) critique of the post-democratic state.

Finally, perhaps the period we have been focussing on could be considered portentous in another sense. As Clarke (2023) argues, since 2016, the ruling party of government has engaged in what came to be known as 'culture wars', seemingly in a way more calculated and strategic than any attempt to remedy the material situation of the left behind. With her critique of the business elites disparaging the values and way of life of the left behind, and the 'liberal lawyers' pursuing humanitarian causes and besmirching the good name of the defenders of the state, May anticipates this tendency. Damaged 'traditions' and thwarted entitlements are evoked, but the mode of discourse is militant, rather than conservative. The discourse of culture wars creates sides in a conflict that the left behind are incited to join.

As we have seen, such ways of thinking were important during the referendum campaign, as external enemies, immigrants and the EU, joined their 'allies' the liberal elites, as the enemies of the true people (Grey, 2021). The term, however, has a longer history. Clarke (2023) explains that the term 'culture wars' entered Britain from the United States, where it was used first in the early 1990s, as a way of characterising the actions of those who defended traditional religious values against liberal co-religionists, imaging themselves to be in an existential fight, with the continuation of the nation at stake (Hunter, 1992). Soon after it was taken up by Republicans, capturing a broader range of issues again to imply a war for the soul of a nation. What marks out the discourse of culture wars, as Feldmann and Morgan (2022) argue, is its expansive, rolling character with new targets constantly being added, whether it be feminists, climate activists, migrants, liberal intellectuals imposing their values from positions of elite power (Goodwin, 2021), or others. After May, the left behind are thus not only to be the target object of haphazard schemes for the remediation of the inequalities they experience. Their cultural marginalisation is also to be addressed by an

enrolment in countless culture wars, mobilised by others, in the divisive style which, we have seen, Grey (2021) depicts so clearly.

## Conclusion

Taking up Bristow and Robinson's (2018) concern with the 'big politics' of Brexit and its consequences for the marginalised and economically vulnerable, this paper has explored the birth of the left behind, as a problem of state rule. Foucauldian studies of the arts of governing brought to the fore the question of the consequences of neoliberal government for individuals, organisations and society, as a political rationality and in terms of its associated technologies of government. They introduced the multiple forces or vectors of power, at state level and beyond, in reproducing an always contested and always evolving rationality. We have tried to apply a similar approach to a different era. Theresa May's intervention, we have argued, marks a strategic moment as she raises the left behind as a problem, frames their predicament and portends subsequent practices designed to remedy their material and cultural disadvantages. May, guided by her advisors, is, at once, a portentous 'culture warrior', an eclectic borrower from an 'impactful' sociological discourse (Ford and Goodwin, 2014) and, for all the talk of anti-neoliberal reaction after the referendum (Cumming et al., 2020), an inheritor of neoliberal reason (Du Gay, 1996; Munro, 2012). May's problematisation nonetheless marks a moment of mutation in neoliberal discourse, as the forces of the state come to be revalued. In the aftermath of the referendum, May and her advisers reimagined the state as an instrument for enhancing a resilient left behind in a new competitive order, whilst also limiting and constraining a rapacious, detached, and disrespectful section of the business elite. In this respect, May recalls the regulatory, competition enhancing ambitions of the so-called German variant of neoliberalism: ordo-liberalism (Bonefeld, 2012; Foucault, 2008). We have therefore highlighted the practical, programmatic consequences of ordoliberal discourse, augmenting what we know of it through the textual presentation of Foucault and his interpreters (Foucault, 2008; Munro, 2012).

But we have also suggested, that May's interventions portend an ad hoc, reactive mode of state intervention in the style of Cerny's (2016) 'post-ordoliberalism', an approach in which business interests, for all the disparagement of elites during and after the referendum (Feldmann and Morgan, 2022) continue to play a key and contentious part. In the manner of a Foucauldian problematisation, we have stopped short of examining later mutations of the left behind in a detailed way. A 'politically performative' (Bristow and Robinson, 2018) analysis, as we see it, could address such issues as the business coalitions charged with managing local schemes for the left behind's remediation, the playing out of culture wars in organisational settings, or the experience of the impossible dream of the 'great meritocracy', in a post-Brexit environment marked by ever growing inequality (Cumming et al., 2020). Alternatively, with Labour's ascendancy, it would seek to examine the consequences and effects of the version of 'statist neoliberalism' which the Party now favours, as it seeks to adapt neoliberalism to address, if not resolve, demands for economic security, social stability and a responsive state (Labour Party, 2024). The 'governmentalisation' of regional disadvantage and economic inequality remains relevant to an administration that views intervention as essential for market optimisation. Here however, our concern has been only to trace the conditions of possibility of a shifting, ambiguous and portentous problematisation of the left behind in Brexit's wake.

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