**A many and invisible kingdom? – the lost and found territories of ‘Brexit Britain’**

Since 2016, various explanations for the ‘British exit’ (‘Brexit’) from the EU have been advanced with a prominent feature of these being a focus on territories. One prominent notion has been that the result reflected a revolt of a ‘Left Behind Britain’ (LBB) of people and places side-lined by the economic, social and cultural changes of the last half century. However, ‘LBB’ is not the only territory whose existence has been reaffirmed, or ‘rediscovered’, in a crisis which has left the United Kingdom a divided and fractured state where the rule of law, constitutional democracy, and integrity of the current UK state territory have come under significant pressure. Informed by this context, this paper offers some reflections on the ‘lost’ and ‘found’ territories of ‘Brexit Britain’.

Key words: territories; British Exit; Europe; populism; left behind places

**Un royaume multiple et invisible? - les territoires perdus et retrouvés de la Grande Bretagne du «Brexit »**

Depuis 2016, diverses explications pour la «sortie britannique» («Brexit») de l'UE ont été avancées avec une caractéristique important de celles-ci étant l'accent mis sur les questions territoriales. A titre d’exemple une idée dominante revendique que le résultat du référendum reflétait une révolte d'une «Left Behind Britain » (la Grande Bretagne ‘laissé derrière’) composé de populations et de lieux mis de côté par les changements économiques, sociaux et culturels du dernier demi-siècle. Cependant, le ‘Left Behind Britain’ n'est pas le seul territoire dont l'existence a été réaffirmé ou «redécouvert», dans une crise qui a laissé le Royaume-Uni un État divisé et fracturé où l'état de droit, la démocratie constitutionnelle et l'intégrité du territoire de l'État britannique actuel ont subi une pression importante. S'inspirant de ce contexte, cet article propose quelques réflexions sur les territoires «perdus» et «trouvés» de la Grande Bretagne de ‘Brexit’ (Brexit Britain).

Mots clés : territoires; sortie britannique de l’UE; Europe; populisme; territoires oubliés

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**Introduction**

In the UK’s 2016 EU referendum 37% of the eligible electorate and 52% of those who voted opted to leave the EU. Since then various interpretations of the causes and consequences of the so-called ‘British Exit’ from the EU (‘Brexit’) have been advanced. A prominent feature of many explanations is the focus on territories and the socioeconomic conditions and populations to be found within them. In the aftermath one particularly prevalent notion has been that the result was caused by a revolt of a ‘Left Behind Britain’ (LBB) composed of places and people side-lined by the economic, social and cultural changes of the last half century. This has arguably become a powerful spatial imaginary (Sykes, 2018) which not only provides a representation of space and place but has gathered ‘performative’ (Watkins, 2015) agency to influence thinking and political and social practices. But ‘LBB’ is not the only territory whose existence has been restated, or ‘rediscovered’, in a crisis which has left the United Kingdom a divided and fractured state in which the rule of law, constitutional democracy, and continuing integrity of the current UK state’s territory have come under significant pressure. This paper does not seek to outline all the twists, turns and tergiversations which have led the UK its present historical pass. Rather it offers some reflections on the ‘lost’ and ‘found’ territories of ‘Brexit Britain’.

**Lost territories?**

The rise of new and populist political movements over recent years has been accompanied by the frequent invocation of the territorial explicans as a means of accounting for ostensibly disruptive changes to established political orders. Three of the well-commented examples of this are the result of the UK’s EU referendum in 2016 following which a ‘spatial trope’ (Nurse and Sykes, 2019) emerged that this was the result of the revolt of a ‘Left Behind Britain’ (LBB); the election of Donald Trump as the 45th. President of the United States in 2016 which is often explained in terms of a ‘main street v. Wall Street, or America beyond the Washington ‘beltway’ phenomena; and the so-called ‘Gilets Jaunes’ movement in France which has been similarly represented in much popular and media discourse as taking root in a *France périphérique* (Guilly, 2015; Delpirou, 2018). In these narratives places that are characterised as marginalised, ‘left-behind’, ‘forgotten’, or as not mattering (Rodrigues-Pose, 2017), are seen as the locus of challenges to established socio-political and territorial orderings. In other words changes in political ‘landscapes’ are heavily attributed to changes in ‘real’ socio-economic landscapes and material geographies. Commonly this state of affairs is seen as being one which has arisen since the end of the post-WW2 political economic consensus and as largely the product of the socio-spatial consequences of the market liberalism which took its place. As Rosamond (2018, p.4) notes in the UK context, ‘The Anglo-liberal growth model arguably fell into crisis long before Brexit emerged as the dominant issue in British politics’ and uneven development has been one of the persistent manifestations of this. Yet the sentiment of being ‘left behind’ is clearly not just about socio-economic conditions. The narratives which accompany it are often expressed in terms of loss and a sense that things were ‘better before’ – for example that Britain has somehow lost its ‘Greatness’. The slogan of the 2016 ‘Leave’ campaign, for example, which sought to wrench the UK out of the EU framework was ‘Take Back Control’, which implied emotively that it had ‘*lost* control’ through its enmeshment in collaborative sovereignty-boosting supranationalism.

Reflecting this the present paper foregrounds the notion of ‘lostness’ to try to capture the complexities and contradictions of territorial ‘left-behindness’, ‘forgotteness’, ‘peripheralness’, and marginality. The allusion to ‘*lost* territories’ seeks to offer a broader way of speaking about the issues discussed above - for example, by trying to decentre the discussions from a sole focus on socio-economic conditions to draw in cultural and historical factors. And whilst not using these systematically, it allows scope for the properties of ‘lost’ and related terms and usages (Box 1) to implicitly inform the discussion.

Box 1 – Definitions of lost & lostness and related usages

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| *Lost* 1. not knowing your way2. when you cannot find something3. no longer existing4. time/chances: wasted5. not relaxed/confident6. completely destroyed7. killed8. not noticing environment9. unable to understand somethingSource: <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/lost_1> *Lostness* 1. the fact or quality of being lost. Noun.

Source; <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/lostness>*Words and usages related to lost*1. [all is not lost](https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/all-is-not-lost)
2. [get/become lost (in something)](https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/get-become-lost-in-something)
3. [get lost](https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/get-lost)
4. [lost for words](https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/lost-for-words)
5. [lost on someone](https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/lost-on-someone)
6. [lost without](https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/lost-without)
7. [make up for lost time](https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/make-up-for-lost-time)
8. [make up/recover lost ground](https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/make-up-recover-lost-ground)

Source: <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/lost_1> |

The reference in the article title to a ‘many and invisible’ kingdom plays on notions of ‘one and indivisible’ nation states and territories associated with ‘strong’ state territorialism (Faludi, 2018). But it also seeks to account for the fact that the state of ‘lostness’ is not simply a matter of material conditions but also of sentiment and interpretation, linked to visibility and ‘presence’ within, and perceived bondedness to, the wider life and territory of the ‘national’ state. The main focus below is on territories and territorialities within the present UK, but reflecting the non-boundedness of territoriality (captured by the analogies of ‘clouds’ and ‘ice floes’ used by Faludi, 2018), at least two of the territories reviewed have an external orientation – the first of these being ‘Europe’.

**Europe - *un ‘Brexit’ sans territoire européen***

The territory and territoriality (or lack thereof), of Europe and the ‘European project’ has been extensively discussed in certain political and academic circles for almost 40 years (Husson 2002; Faludi, 2018). Such debates range far beyond the issue of the UK leaving the EU, but have a particular (non)place in the ‘Brexit’ story. The material and symbolic insularity of Britain have long combined to forge the perception of ‘Europe’, or ‘the continent’, as ‘territorial other’ for UK Eurosceptics (Sykes, 2018). This is well epitomised by the oft cited, but sadly apocryphal, newspaper headline ‘Fog in Channel – continent isolated’! History, especially bowdlerised history, plays an important role here with rememberings of the histories of, for example, the Roman Empire, the Reformation, various wars (especially the two World Wars of the 20th. century), powerfully shaping Eurosceptic minds. As the historian Robert Kee once said ‘History is indeed a difficult prison to escape from’ (Kee, 1995). When the future Prime Minister Boris Johnson published a book about the Roman Empire he used the opportunity to make unfavourable but rather inchoate comparisons with the EU (Johnson, 2006) - he was also given a BBC television series to promote his ideas. Meanwhile some ‘Brexiters’ have tried to present leaving the EU as an echo of the Reformation – ignoring this was in fact a ‘European phenomenon’ (Cocks, 2018). The idea that, whilst Britain is presently an island in physical terms, it has as culture shaped by international flows from Europe and further afield struggled to assert itself – though in some versions of the ‘Global Britain’ narrative (see below) this is acknowledged and associated with the view that Europe is just too small to fulfil Britain’s ‘exceptional’ ambition and destiny. This dovetails with another a ‘Brexiter’ tendency that demotes the physical geographical properties of territory. For example, the UK International Trade Secretary Liam Fox has argued the present era ‘is potentially the beginning of what I might call ‘post geography trading world’ where we are much less restricted in having to find partners who are physically close to us’(Fox, 2016). Such thinking is also reflected in modelling by Patrick Minford of the group ‘Economists for Brexit’ (now rebranded Economists for Free Trade), which suggests the UK’s welfare will rise by 4% as a result of increased trade. This does not employ the ‘gravity equation’ which accounts for physical distance between trade partners, incorporate the effects of product differentiation, or make use of empirical data on trade (for a full review see Sampson et al., 2017). Meanwhile in 2018, the then ‘Brexit Secretary’, Dominic Raab, made the startling admission that ‘I hadn't quite understood the full extent of this, but if you look at the UK and if you look at how we trade in goods, we are particularly reliant on the Dover-Calais crossing’ (BBC News, 2018) – the kind of ‘lostness’ which consists of ‘not noticing one’s environment’ (Box 1) perhaps! Yet ‘Remainers’ too have struggled to project a clear and positive and material vison of the European territory - notably in response to questions like ‘where will does Europe/will the EU end?’; and Leave campaign messages, that belonging to the EU leaves the UK dangerously exposed to phenomena like migration and conflict in places like the Middle East, or that ’76 million’ Turks are poised to move west due to EU-Turkey agreements and possible Turkish accession to the EU (Vote Leave, 2016). Further ‘territorial’ ripostes from ‘Brexiters’ have included that ‘The EU isn’t Europe’, or its variant ‘We’re leaving the EU not Europe’. Europe as a defined and understood territorial entity was effectively lost early on if it was indeed ever really present in the ‘Brexit’ saga and as history shows the distance between a lost territory and a lost cause is often short.

**‘Left behind Britain’ – *a territory* *lost, found, lost, and found again?***

As noted above, the dominant spatial reading of ‘Brexit’ has become that of a revolt of ‘Left Behind Britain’ (LBB) (Nurse and Sykes, 2019). In this the vote to leave the EU is represented as largely an outcome - almost a form of ‘pay back’; for the uneven geographical changes and economic restructuring of the UK in the era of resurgent economic (neo)liberalism. As Isakjee and Lorne (2018, p.7) note under its conditions ‘towns and cities suffered from the loss of manufacturing jobs’ whereas ‘well-paid service sector jobs have largely been concentrated in London, the South East and financial centres in larger British cities’.

Coupled with this, the burdens of austerity, far from being distributed according to the former finance minister (2010-2016) George Osborne’s dictum of “we’re all in this together” (Osborne, 2015), had been strongly socially regressive, hitting some of the less advantaged UK places and people hardest (Centre for Cities, 2019). The largest real-term falls in total local government spending in the 2009/10 to 2017/18 period disproportionately hit towns and cities in the north of England, which have on average seen a 20% reduction in their budgets. In contrast towns and cities in the South West, East of England and South East (excluding London) have seen cuts of only 9% on average. This level of cuts has meant that once local authorities have supported vital services such as social care there is little left for spending on other things such as planning and development. It is all a long way from the rhetoric of localism which characterised the 2010-15 coalition government, and the bespoke ‘devolution deals’ concluded with some of the new ‘Combined Authority’ areas of England are in reality small compared to the decline in core funding of their constitutive local authorities.

Such trends are held to have fomented the conditions for Brexit which can been seen as part of a wider European phenomenon. As Davoudi (2020) notes:

There are many reasons for the rising anti-EU sentiments but, one important factor, which is of utmost relevance to spatial planners, is the growing geography of discontent or Andres Rodrigues-Pose (2017) puts it ‘the revenge of the places that don’t matter’.

The pattern of the pro-leave vote in 2016 it is suggested reflects the geographical pattern of this sentiment in the present UK with LBB being cast as the locus of a ‘revolt’ against processes such as globalisation and austerity and the ‘elite’ which apparently supports and benefits from both. Yet the irony was that the ‘Leave’ campaign was largely steered and financed by a cast of archetypal ‘hyperglobalisers’ drawing on ideas about how Britain’s potential could be unleashed by stepping outside the sclerotic residual social democratic constraints of the EU and passé principles of the wider ‘European social model’. This latter view was powerfully represented in the 2012 publication *Britannia Unchained: Global Lessons for Growth and Prosperity* (Kwarteng et al., 2012) a number of whose authors were later to go on to become prominent supporters of the UK leaving the EU (the politicians Kwasi Kwarteng, Priti Patel, Dominic Raab and Elizabeth Truss). The book gained notoriety for parts of its commentary on the state of contemporary Britain, noting for example that ‘Once they enter the workplace, the British are among the worst idlers in the world. We work among the lowest hours, we retire early and our productivity is poor’ (Kwarteng et al., 2012, p.61)[[1]](#footnote-1). The prescribed remedy was to seek a more global and liberalised future, founded on a faith in British exceptionalism:

For its size, no other nation is more culturally influential in music or literature. It retains enough independence from Europe to not get dragged down by a broken single currency, or an out-of-date social democratic model (Kwarteng et al., 2012, p.112)

Yet many analyses of the vote to leave in parts of LBB suggest it was driven by the impacts, and a sense of loss and lostness (e.g. of former industries, ‘jobs for life’, traditional social and community relations, a sense of certainty and confidence in the present and future); in the face of, precisely the kinds of trends which the ‘Brexit globalisers’ were promoting as the path to a golden British future. Thus ‘Global Britain’ may have been pitched as an extremely exciting prospectus of change and gain for the true ‘Brexit’ believers, but as Barber and Jones (2017, p.154) note:

…when the Prime Minister (PM) Theresa May proclaimed that *“June 23 was not the moment Britain chose to step back from the world, it was the moment we chose to build a truly Global Britain’’* she may have been ‘scrabbling for a new vision. But it was one at odds with an electorate which wanted to reverse the effects of globalisation.

In the aftermath of the referendum PM Theresa May thus balanced the globalist rhetoric with claims to have heard the cry of LBB apparently ready to take its side in the crusade against globalisation and Europeanisation. In autumn 2016 (May, 2016) she argued that:

today, too many people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with the people down the road, the people they employ, the people they pass in the street.

But if you believe you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere. You don’t understand what the very word ‘citizenship’ means.

This kind of narrative evokes the ‘territorial communitarianism’ described by Santamaria and Elissalde (2018, p.57), or ‘Trumpism’s’ predilection for ‘closure, withdrawal and protectionism with respect to the outside’ and a wish to ‘cut oneself off from globalisation, in the hope that doing so will somehow bring back a bygone world’ (Stiglitz, 2017). Such populist narratives again seem imbued with a desire to recover something lost – a ‘better past’, a ‘stronger’ more ‘homogenous’ and ‘cohesive’ community etc. In practical terms though, what do the rhetoric and promises to address the issues of LBB mean? To address this there is a need to firstly consider the predicted effects on such areas of any UK exit from the EU; and secondly to consider the change to the regional policy environment which could result from this.

Addressing the first point, the UK government’s own studies predict that future growth under any ‘Brexit’ scenario will be lower than if the UK remains in the EU, and its ‘own economic assessment shows that a ‘no deal’ exit from the EU would be the most economically damaging outcome for the UK, with the effect most pronounced in the North East and the West Midlands’ (Exiting the European Union Committee, 2019). Academic studies similarly indicate that it is the ‘Midlands and the North of England which are by far the most vulnerable’ and that they are ‘more exposed to Brexit than any other region in Europe’, being ‘much more dependent on EU markets for their trade than London, the South-East or Scotland’ (Ortega-Argilés and McCann, 2018). Such predicted impacts are far higher under a no deal scenario – for example, government assessments suggest that economic growth over 15 years could be reduced by 16% in North East England, 13% in the West Midlands, and 12% in the North West and Northern Ireland (BBC News, 2018). Work undertaken on the new Withdrawal Agreement (WA) concluded with the EU in Autumn 2019 suggest that this ‘would leave the UK economy worse off than Theresa May’s deal’, as ‘Great Britain will have no customs union with the EU, no level playing field arrangements and a limited (or quite possibly no) free trade agreement’. It predicts that the new proposals ‘could reduce UK GDP per capita ten years after Brexit by between 2.3% and 7%, compared to remaining in the EU’ in comparison to PM Theresa May’s agreement for which the GDP per capita loss was between –1.9% and –5.5% and a no-agreement exit with predicted losses of ‘between –3.5% and –8.7%’ (UK in a Changing Europe, 2019). All forms of ‘Brexit’ seem on the balance of available evidence likely to exacerbate regional disparities and be socially and spatially regressive. More recent analyses have also explored the potential ‘joint impact of Brexit and the coronavirus on a regional basis’ (Petrie and Norman, 2020, p.7).

As regards the second point regarding the regional policy environment, one of the greatest ironies of the 2016 referendum result was that a consistent source of support over the past half century for UK places caricatured under the LBB label, has been the ECC/EU’s Cohesion Policy (Sykes and Schulze-Baeing, 2017; CLASS, 2018). As noted above, many such areas also have economies which are more integrated with the rest of the EU than those of London and the South East, (McCann, 2016, 2018; Semple, 2017). In the 1980s “managed decline” (BBC News, 2011) for certain major urban areas was discussed at the highest levels of the state, but this remained unacceptable to a number of key actors both in the UK and within the European institutions. EU regional support was therefore provided in various formats from the highest levels of ‘Objective 1’ funding, through to targeted programmes for specific territories such as former coal fields and cross-border programmes. All this has led to commentary that some areas had ‘shot themselves’ in the foot by voting to leave the EU (Wyn Jones, 2016), perhaps invoking again ‘lostness’ in the sense of ‘not noticing the environment’ within which one sits.

To make good the rhetoric about supporting LBB, the 2017 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto proposed the creation of a so called ‘UK Shared Prosperity Fund’ (UKSPF) to replace lost EU Cohesion Policy support. Yet despite consultation ‘for the moment, there is little detail on the mechanism, governance and value’ (CPMR, 2019) of the proposed new UKSPF. An industrial strategy titled *Building a Britain Fit for the Future* (HM Government, 2017) has also been adopted, though McCann (2018) notes how the place-based component of this has been reduced in comparison with the draft Green Paper. Local Industrial Strategies have been prepared to give the industrial strategy a local dimension. As regards the replacement for EU Cohesion Policy instruments, the report of an inquiry by an All Party Parliamentary Group on ‘Post-Brexit Funding for Nations, Regions and Local Areas’ (APPG, 2018) notes how ‘Just about all the contributors to the Inquiry’, feel that the annual budget for the proposed UKSPF would need to be around £1.5 billion adjusted for inflation to match in real terms the present levels scale of ERDF and ESF funding. Confidence in any arrangements that may replace EU support to regions is also tempered in some places by the UK government track record on austerity discussed above and knowledge of how in the 2014-2020 round of funding, the then government chose to allocate European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) funding to some regions. Merseyside, for example, was allocated €202m (£167.835m) of funding, when the European Commission’s formula suggested the area should receive around €350m (£290.147m) (BBC News, 2014).

Despite the rhetoric of the post-referendum period, attention to policy options to address the needs of LBB seems to have waxed and waned – hence the title of this subsection refers to such areas moving from being ‘lost to found, to lost again’ a number of times. The glacial pace of development of the UKSPF seemed to suggest this issue was a low priority. However, in March 2019 - as Theresa May was desperately seeking to garner support for the EU WA from certain northern Labour MPs, there was the sudden announcement of a so-called ‘ Stronger Towns Fund’ with £1.6 billion to ‘boost growth and give communities a greater say in their future after Brexit’. Yet as local representatives and policymakers in such areas quickly observed, this sum was a drop in the ocean in the face of: the socially regressive cuts of the austerity decade which have hit some less advantaged places and people hardest (Centre for Cities, 2019); the predicted impacts of any form of ‘Brexit’; and, foregone future EU funding opportunities (Sykes, 2019). In the second part of 2019 LBB, and in particular the north of England, also received early attention from the new Prime Minister Boris Johnson. He revisited the same rhetoric as May adding some hyperbole about ‘turbocharging’ regional growth; revisited previous pledges of substantial investment in east-west northern rail links; and, increased the amount of funding for the Stronger Towns to £3.6 billion, rechristening it simply the ‘Towns Fund’.

Following the 2019 general election in which Conservative MPs were elected in a number of previously Labour Party held parliamentary seats in the north of England, many observers expect Johnson to make some gestures towards these areas – one early announcement was that Treasury (finance ministry) rules may be rewritten to make investment in the north and the Midlands more viable by not assessing them solely in terms of their economic contribution (which tends to favour more prosperous regions) (Walker, 2019). At the time of writing though there is still a lack of certainty about just how much money the mooted UKSPF will provide to regions in lieu of foregone ESIF support (Elliott, 2020). There will doubtless be some offer to ‘LBB’, but PM Boris Johnson’s style of politicking has led some to think it may very well be delivered in the form of centrally announced 'grand gestures' designed maximise the credit he garners for every penny spent. As noted by stakeholders (APPG, 2018, pp.4-5) EU funds are in contrast multiannual financial allocations attributed on the basis of need, principles of additionality, and key themes - creating a different kind of relationship with the places they assist. Their significance is not just about the amount of money, but how it is managed and how much autonomy it gives to places to pursue their own 'place based' and tailored approach without having to be supplicants to central government. This point holds even if some have argued that the alignment of Cohesion Policy with a limited number of sectoral objectives more recently has arguably detracted from its territorial aspect, and could lead to a usurping of the territorial by the thematic, or sectoral, (Mendez, 2013) constraining the flexibility to tailor interventions to local context.

In contrast to the lack of domestic clarity, a clearer picture is beginning to emerge of the potential funding UK regions could receive from EU Cohesion Policy post-2021. Work by the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR, 2019) suggests that if the UK were to remain in the EU it could be in line to receive around €13 billion of regional development funding between 2021 and 2027. This would be equivalent to a 22% increase compared to the current 2014 to 2020 funding period. This reflects the sobering fact that, once again, many areas of the UK are falling behind the EU average in terms of regional prosperity and internal regional disparities between regions within the UK have also increased in recent years. As a result areas like Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, West Wales and the Valleys, South Yorkshire, Tees Valley & Durham, and Lincolnshire could receive EU regional funding of over €500 per person per year after 2021. And again this funding would be committed over a multiannual period from 2021 to 2027.

In practice the focus of the UK’s proto-‘Brexit’ state on issues such as ending freedom of movement and retrospectively stripping away citizenship rights from non-UK EU nationals has largely eclipsed the attention given future investment to aid the places and communities of LBB. Sketchy development of a serious place-based dimension to future industrial and regional policy in the UK also creates uncertainty for the regions of LBB not least in terms of whether new arrangements will compensate for the foregone support from the EU after 2021. Any expedient clientelistic ‘deals’ with certain places in return for political support would seem to be a poor substitute for a strategic longer term and needs-based regional policy. Ultimately, since 2016, the lost territories of LBB appear to have been rediscovered (or found), and ‘lost’ again on a number of occasions as the ensuing political chaos has unfolded.

**Comfortable Britain & Middle England - *the real ‘Brexitland’?***

In April 2019 a letter from four UK Labour Party Members of Parliament (MPs) commented that ‘Journalist after journalist writes it. Broadcaster after broadcaster says it out loud. The London based metropolitan media has declared it so. The North is Brexitland’ (Creagh et al., 2019). Though it is the case that in many less prosperous areas including in northern England a majority of those who voted chose to leave, Dorling (2016) notes that:

Contrary to popular belief, 52% of people who voted Leave in the EU referendum lived in the southern half of England, and 59% were in the middle classes, while the proportion of Leave voters in the lowest two social classes was just 24%’*.*

Similarly, Goodwin (2017) points out that the largest of the three key groups that drove the leave vote was what the National Centre for Social Research (2016) has termed ‘Affluent Eurosceptics’. Therefore although the referendum vote is typically represented in terms of a revolt of ‘LBB Britain’, its geography was as much, and arguably more so, one of a ‘comfortable Britain’ (Dorling 2016). This leads Isakjee and Lorne to argue ‘that a solely economic analysis of Brexit is insufficient in either explaining the vote or in the interpretation of disillusionment or what it means to feel ‘left behind’’ (2018, p.3). They note that ‘Brexit politics is at least as much about identity’ and that ‘The calls to ‘leave Europe’ do not merely appeal to those feeling left behind economically, but they exploit feelings of cultural alienation and actively appeal to racist sentiments, too’ (Isakjee and Lorne, 2018, p.3). Immigration and concerns about ‘theoretical’ sovereignty were concerns of voters across older, affluent, and more socially conservative demographics and places which did not fit the reductionist caricature of ‘LBB’ (Goodwin, 2017). Values based explanations of why certain individuals may have voted to leave the EU have also offered a corrective to an overemphasis on its roots in socio-economic conditions in different places (Kaufmann, 2016). Reviewing the evidence Nurse and Sykes (2019, p.15) therefore conclude ‘that in absolute terms the key territories of the leave result were to be found in areas of affluent Euroscepticism primarily in southern England’. Yet in some ways this ‘real Brexitland’ has been lost from view given the attention focussed on the ‘found’ territory of LBB.

**Metropolitan England – *a territory lost and found?***

The second half of the 20th century in England saw a high level of counter-urbanisation or ‘urban exodus’ (Champion, 2001) and in the 1980s the context of economic turbulence, mass unemployment and urban unrest, pushed the situation to a tipping point. Following her re-election in 1987, PM Margaret Thatcher famously commented “we must do something about those inner cities” (Guardian Newspaper, 2014; Jacobs, 1988, p.1942) – the use of the word *‘those’* implying places which where ‘other’, unfamiliar to the mainstream and jarring with an acceptable spatial imaginary of English rural-suburbia. In response to the ‘urban crisis’ state spatial policy shifted towards a focus on ‘urban problems’ and “urban regeneration” emerged as a major policy field (Couch et al., 2011).

In the 1990s and 2000s the New Labour governments (1997-2010) promoted a so-called ‘Urban Renaissance’ in part inspired by the report of an ‘Urban Task Force’ led by the architect Richard Rogers (Rogers, 1999). This agenda focussed attention on the design quality and liveability of cities (often inspired by ‘European’ urbanism) and was allied with investment in regenerating the big cities (especially their centres); ‘town centre first’ policies for retail development; and, targets to increase the amount of new housing built on previously developed ‘brownfield’ land to limit sprawl and foster urban vitality. The policy was generally perceived to be a success, having contributed to a ‘return of’ and ‘return to’ the city (Rae, 2013) and processes of reurbanisation (Dembski et al., 2019). In a culture often seen as having anti-urban traits (Taylor, 1998), there has been a slow shift of perceptions about cities, from their being viewed as a source and locus of problems, to a recognition of their economic, social, cultural importance, and concomitant rise in their attractiveness. This is not to ignore that major urban centres still contain some of the most extreme concentrations of multiple deprivation and disadvantage, but from being very much the ‘lost’ territories of the nation it is fair to conclude they have been ‘found’. In contrast – and overlapping with the LBB narrative; there have been claims that smaller cities and towns have ‘lost out’ in recent times. As Prothereo and Campus, (2019, p.3) note ‘some towns are among the most prosperous places in the country for residents to live, while others are sometimes described as ”left behind”’. Initiatives such as the Key Cities group and Centre for Towns have developed this policy narrative[[2]](#endnote-1). In the 2016 referendum larger urban centres including all but one of the Core Cities[[3]](#endnote-2) tended to vote remain, but many smaller places were more Eurosceptic. The heavily ‘Brexit’ biased press (Levy et al., 2016) responded by promoting the notion of the ‘liberal metropolitan elite’ to pejoratively describe those living in bigger urban areas and generated stereotypes of metropolitan citizens, politicians and commentators as ‘remoaners’, ‘snowflakes’, ‘traitors’ and ‘saboteurs’. Some mappings aggregated the results to each territory of the UK or to parliamentary constituencies using a majoritarian ‘first past the post’ logic. As Nurse and Sykes (2019, p.3) note ‘given that the purpose of the ballot was not to send representatives to Parliament but to answer a question at the UK scale this is problematic – not least as it creates an impression of a far more one-sided result than actually occurred’. Mapping results at the regional level in England, and for Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland did not provide much granularity in the geographical representation of the data and arguably over-emphasised English Euroscepticism. Notably it created an impression that London was the only remain territory in England whereas in fact most other metropolitan cities (with the exception of Birmingham, Bradford and Sheffield) and some smaller cities (e.g. York, Oxford, Winchester) also voted remain.

On a wider front the narrative of large cities as populated solely by cultural and financial elites also oversimplified a more complex reality. As Nurse and Sykes (2019, p.10) note ‘it would be patently wrong, to suggest that merely living in a city makes you ‘elite’’. They analyse areas in the Liverpool City Region comparing ‘wards that have similar socio-economic conditions and which are highly ranked in the Index of Multiple Deprivation but which voted differently in the referendum’. This leads them to conclude that in accounting for the results there is a ‘need for greater contextual understandings and appreciation of cultural and place-based factors’ (Nurse and Sykes, 2019, p.16).

Finally, with uncertainty about future levels of support for city and regional development, the loss of the EU role in fostering place based action should be noted. Consider, for example, that the 2000-2006 EU Objective One programme invested £929 million into an area like Merseyside (the Liverpool City Region) (Parkinson, 2019, p.62) which, with ‘match funding’ gave a total investment of over £1 billion over 6-7 years, whilst the present Liverpool City Region devolution deal delivers £900 million but over thirty years. Furthermore ‘When adjusted for inflation, Liverpool City Council has £436 million less to spend per year now than it did in 2010, which equates to a 63 percent cut in its overall budget’ (Liverpool City Council, 2020). By contrast Parkinson (2019, p. 65) concludes that for a place like Liverpool ‘the sheer scale of Objective 1 funding caused a step-change in its confidence and gave its leaders the stability of funding over a long period of plan for change’; that ‘Huge progress was made in a relatively short space of time’; and, the place ‘moved from a vulnerable post-imperial to a stronger more diverse economy embracing knowledge, science and innovation, culture and tourism’. The reference to the post-imperial condition points to another ‘lost territory’ that has enfevered the imagination of some in ‘Brexit Britain’.

**‘Brexit’s’ phantom territorial limb - *the Empire Strikes Back?***

As every school child once knew, the British Empire was variously one on which ‘the sun never sets’, the ‘greatest empire the world has ever seen’, or simply ‘all the red/pink bits on the map of the globe’. The ‘lost territories’ of ‘Brexit’ are not only to be found within the physical space of the present UK but in ‘buccaneering’ imaginaries of sepoys, ‘British Malaya’, and the Kalka–Shimla railway. Thus, Dorling and Tomlinson (2019a, p.2) argue that the referendum result could be seen as ‘the last vestiges of empire working their way out of the British psyche’, adding that:

Clinging to fantasies of empire, a group of people – led by those mainly educated in schools designed to produce the rulers of empire – are today in the process of creating an era of misrule and mistakes that will have serious consequences for all the people of the four nations that currently make up Britain, those in many connected European countries, and well beyond. (Dorling and Tomlinson, 2019b, p.2)

And although the *Britannia Unchained* apostles presented exiting the EU as a forward looking opportunity to break free from the ‘outdated’, ‘little’, ‘Social democratic’, Europe of the EU, the aftermath of the referendum saw their ‘Global Britain’ mantra morph at times into something distinctly less future facing with references to ‘Empire 2.0’ (Coates 2017). For Isakjee and Lorne (2018, p.4) ‘However offensive this label, however unrealistic such expectations and divorced from rational policy, the politics of Brexit played here speaks to a spatial imaginary of Britain’s ‘lost greatness’’. Whilst for Dorling and Tomlinson (2019b) ‘The Brexiteer master manipulators used such memories to take control of the opinions of some voters through a campaign notable for lies and misinformation’. For Rosamond (2018, p. 7) ‘discursively, the hyperglobalist position evokes nostalgia for the nineteenth century economic order – the era of a sovereign Britain exercising a supposedly benign influence over a global regime of free trade’. This historically orientated vision of Britain’s place in the world, cultivated a nostalgic sense of loss that connected elite post-imperial narratives of ‘Britain’s declining historical global power and ‘leadership’ with the real material degradations of those suffering from the ravages of the neoliberal economy’ (Isakjee and Lorne, 2018, p.4). It thus sought to overcome some of the patent contradictions between the inward facing ‘territorial communitarian’ (Santamaria and Elissalde, 2018) and outward looking ‘hyperglobalist’ (Siles-Brügge, 2018) orientations of the ‘Brexit’ project.

Promoters of Global Britain and Empire 2.0 made much of strengthening links with ‘old friends’ in the Commonwealth and the ‘Anglosphere’ with a notable tendency to focus on select ‘sister countries’ in North America and Australasia - aren’t former African dominions ‘sister countries’ too some wondered? What might be different about them? The invocation of the ‘lost territory’ of the Empire also had to confront the fact that Commonwealth and other former dominions ‘have not so far been too enthusiastic about trading with a country which once took their land and labour and protected its own trading position’ (Dorling and Tomlinson, 2019b), whilst countries like New Zealand and Australia have prioritised trade deals with the EU (Boffey, 2018). For Ricketts (2017) ‘The Global Britain (or, dreadfully, Empire 2.0) rhetoric is based on an understanding of African and Commonwealth nations as junior partners who would jump at any opportunity to forge closer links with the UK’. This inevitably came across to many as a neo-colonial and rather patronising perspective. Within the UK too, the nostalgia for empire which appealed to some was off-putting to others. As if ‘the xenophobic and anti-immigrant tone of the Leave campaigns’ were not already unappealing enough, Begum (2018) notes that:

Slogans such as ‘take back control’ and ‘make Britain great again’ were less appealing to ethnic minority Remain voters, who associated them with nostalgia for empire and a longing for a ‘preimmigration white era’ on the part of the Leave campaign.

Ethnic minority voters had been crudely courted by the ‘Leave’ campaign which sought to play different immigrant communities off against one another with clientelistic promises (Haque, 2018). In the event though they voted overwhelmingly to Remain in the EU even if this wider pattern ‘obscures significant differences between and within minority groups’ (Begum, 2018). Clearly not everybody was inspired by the rekindled vision of the ‘lost territory’ of the British imperium. For the journalist Martin Kettle (2020) ‘The dark star behind Brexit, without which it cannot be understood, remains the British people’s unreconciled relationship with the experience of empire’, noting too that this ‘was always a disabling failure. Brexit has now turned it into an epochal self-inflicted wound’.

**The lost United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – *the many and invisible Kingdom?***

The final ‘lost territory’ is that of the state most concerned by the whole prospect of ‘Brexit’ - the UK. It is of course itself a union of different national communities and territories constructed over many centuries constituting a precocious case of ‘state territorialism’ (Faludi, 2018). Acts of Union brought Scotland and Ireland to the ‘United Kingdom’ at the start of the 18th. and 19th. centuries respectively. Yet for Dorling and Tomlinson (2019a) a ‘major consequence of the misrule of Britannia’ represented by phenomena such as ‘Brexit’ is possibly ‘the further dissolution of the UK (most of Ireland having left the Kingdom a century ago). Given that the ‘Brexiter’ manifesto was presented as offering the ‘patriotic’ opportunity to the UK to break free from the bonds of collaborative supranationalism and rekindle (lost?) greatness, it was perhaps ironic how little attention its proponents gave to its potential effects on the territorial cohesion (politically and economically) of the United Kingdom as presently constituted.

There was little prominence given in the 2016 referendum campaign to the Scottish and Northern Irish ‘questions’. Yet the interests of such territories in relation to the European question have inevitably become linke too the issues of their devolved or autonomous government and independence. Many in these parts of the present UK, including some of those who do not seek full independence, consider that collaborative governance and subsidiarity ought to apply across the scales of multi-level governance from the EU to the subnational scales. ‘Brexit’ was thus seen as providing an opportunity for a ‘power grab’ recentralisation of the British polity and as risking the reanimation of political tensions. The ‘Scottish’ question and the complexities of avoiding a hard Ireland – UK border on the island of Ireland if the UK left the EU, were not given much attention in the UK ‘national’ debate in 2016 and did not appear to be issues that excessively troubled those advocating the leave option. When both Scotland (62%) and Northern Ireland (55.8%) voted clearly to remain in the EU in 2016 the complexity and territoriality of such issues was reaffirmed (Gibraltar too voted by 96% to remain).

The lack of detailed knowledge (notably historical) and empathy for the distinctive territoriality, parts of the territory of the Union amongst leading proponents of ‘Brexit’ was painfully obvious. In 2018 the future PM Boris Johnson compared the challenge of avoiding a hard border in Northern Ireland to the operation of the London congestion charge at the boundaries of different London boroughs (BBC News, 2018). Yet under the WA he concluded with the EU in Autumn 2019 there will be border checks on trade inside the UK (Stone, 2020) and in January 2020, nationalists and unionists in the newly reconvened Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) united to vote overwhelmingly to reject it (McClements, 2020) .

Meanwhile the notion that the 2014 Scottish independence referendum had been a ‘once in a generation’ opportunity to vote on independence, has had to confront the fact that the pro-union ‘Better Together’ campaign had claimed that rejecting independence was the only sure way to guarantee Scotland remained in the EU (National Newsdesk, 2019). This has turned out to be diametrically opposed to reality, with Scotland being rent asunder from the EU against its will precisely *because* it had remained in the UK. Yet the country had in fact voted more strongly to ‘remain’ in the EU in 2016 (62%) than it had to stay ‘together’ with the UK in 2014 (55%). Furthermore some of the arguments made by certain unionist politicians in support of ‘Brexit’, directly contradicted those they had made against independence in the ‘Better Together’ unionist campaign of 2014. Added to this the UK government is perceived to not have included Scotland significantly in process of preparing to leave the EU (Paterson, 2020), or to have responded constructively to the Scottish Government’s proposals for a pragmatic version of ‘Brexit’ which would keep the UK in the Single Market and Customs Union (Scottish Government, 2018, p.5). This irritates much Scottish opinion as does the fact that the revised WA of 2019 clearly included bespoke arrangements for the other territory of the UK which had voted to remain, Northern Ireland.

There was little surprise when the Scottish Parliament voted symbolically by a large margin to rejecte the EU Withdrawal agreement in January 2020. In January 2020 First Minister Nicola Sturgeon made an application under Section 30 of the Scotland Act 1998 to devolve the power to hold a new independence referendum to the Scottish Parliament. This was refused by UK PM Boris Johnson opening the way to a constitutional stand-off. Scottish opinion is not placated when even some ‘progressive’ politicians in parties like the Labour Party are openly hostile to a new independence referendum (Hughes, 2020), or seeks draw an equivalence between the civic Celtic nationalism of Scotland and the nativist communitarian nationalism of ‘Brexit’ (Brown, 2020). One manifestation of the tensions ‘Brexit’ is contributing to within the Union is the lack of clear consensus between England, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, on how the proposed UKSPF should be divided up with consultations on this suggesting that ‘The sensitivity on this point appears considerable’ (APPG, 2018).

Perhaps the holding of a UK general election in December 2019 might have provided the salve to reconcile and rebind the UK and reassert its state territoriality as the primus inter pares amongst the splintered and competing territorialties discussed above – especially given it delivered a large majority to the Conservative Party committed to the UK leaving the EU? Possibly, but some of the idiosyncrasies of the territorial-majoritarian electoral system used for parliamentary elections in the UK should be considered. Note for example that the Conservatives secured 43.6% of the popular vote and gaining 0.33 million more votes (+1.3%) and 48 more seats than in 2017, whilst the Liberal Democrats gained 1.31 million more votes (+4.15) but ended-up with one less seat than in 2017 (Uberoi et al., 2019). In the ‘first past the post’ system a complex interplay of how many voters a party attracts and where determines its electoral fortunes. For example, Smith (2020) points out that the Conservatives have and “efficiently distributed vote” and that this “comes from Tory votes being located in the right places across the country, so minimizing ‘wasted surplus’ votes from piling up huge majorities in safe constituencies, and also minimizing ‘redundant votes’, in seats where the party does not win”.

The Labour Party lost many votes and seats, but the ‘Brexit’ related causes of this have frequently been misrepresented. Overall, contrary to some commentary Labour’s principle ‘Brexit problem’ was ‘not losing Leavers’ but ‘losing Remainers’ (Kellner, 2019). But the fact the Conservatives did gain a number of traditionally Labour held seats in areas which might fit under the LBB caricature contributed to popularising a new spatial imaginary – the (broken) ‘Red Wall’ of northern Labour Party strongholds. For Baston (2019) though, whilst ‘The Conservatives have made a real breakthrough in working class northern seats’ the ‘extent of it is exaggerated by the loosely-defined Red Wall lumping in a load of traditional marginal seats as well as left-behind towns and former mining country’, adding that many of these marginal seats ‘are pretty close to the national average on demographic indicators, housing, education, work and so on, and have a range of communities from the prosperous to the severely deprived’ (Baston, 2019).

Finally, despite the overall majority secured by the Conservatives seat terms, overall the combined vote share for pro-‘Brexit’ parties was 47.33%, whilst that of parties committed to halting it, or offering a referendum on the terms of any withdrawal agreement, was 52.67% (Nixon, 2019). The country is clearly still divided, with the popular vote now going against leaving the EU by a slightly bigger margin than it went in favour of it in 2016 and recent polling suggesting that opinion is now in favour of remaining by a ‘highly symbolic 52-48 margin’ (Woodcock, 2020).

**Conclusion**

The UK today presents a many faceted and jumbled morass of territories and territorialisms – some celebrated and privileged, some ignored or denied, some rediscovered, others lost or found. Many of the fissures and tensions outline above have been building for a considerable period of time, but ‘Brexit’ has thrown them into sharp relief. More widely the territorial aspects of Europe and the limits of putative EU territorialism, are debated, misrepresented and contested across Europe not only in the UK. But in the ‘Brexit’ debate *‘Europe’* as a territory was never truly ‘found’ suffering a form of lostness and eclipse both from a material geographic and institutional and societal perspective. Its main personality was that of a ‘territorial’ other against which Eurosceptic passions of insular exceptionalism or dreams of wider global opening could be set – as Kettle (2020) remarks ‘Only a nation that is intoxicated by the need to be “great” would have cut itself off from its neighbours as we did’.

Left Behind Britain is the ‘lost-and-found’ territory of ‘Brexit’. Its pro-‘Brexit’ stance has been attributed to things ‘no longer existing’, ‘long lost’ or even, ‘completely destroyed’ (industry, opportunity, community etc.); ‘time/chances wasted’ (to address deep-seated socio-economic issues); ‘lack of confidence’ in, and ‘inability to understand’, a changing world; ‘not noticing one’s environment’, and ‘being unable to understand something’ (the importance of EU markets and cohesion support to its interests). Perhaps the hope of such territories was to ‘make up for lost time’ and to ‘recover lost ground’. The irony being that in their ‘lost’ years EU Cohesion Policy has been one source of support which had not left these places behind when the UK state’s attention had been intermittent, and many of them are also more dependent than average on EU markets.

Comfortable Britain/Middle England constitutes a ‘lost’ territory of ‘Brexit’ in the sense that it is in absolute terms the real heartland of the whole affair, but this is rarely noted. Most leave voters resided in such areas, belonging to older, more affluent and socially conservative demographics.

Metropolitan areas of the UK were the great lost territories of the 1970s and 1980s, being seen as economically, culturally and societally decadent in the face of economic restructuring and as the locus of problems not opportunities - an image they shared with many smaller deindustrialising places and areas like the coalfields. But wider economic changes and concerted public policy efforts in the period since then have contributed to major material and perceptual shifts. The 2016 referendum perhaps served to underline just how ‘found’ these territories now are, especially in contrast to the smaller places and less metropolitan regions now caricatured as ‘LBB’.

The British Empire - perhaps the ‘lost territory’ par excellence, exerted a subtle but powerful influence over the ‘Brexit’ debate becoming bound-up with nostalgic regret about Britain’s allegedly ‘lost greatness’ and notions such as ‘Global Britain’ and ‘Empire 2.0’. This helped to cement the potentially contradictory desires of nostalgic, nativist leave supporters to get back to a better ‘lost’ past and to remain aloof from the contemporary world, and the febrile visions of the hyperglobalist and liberal leave supporters (who were often not immune to a bit of nostalgia too), into a winning coalition. How these contradictions and tensions play out in practice will be interesting to witness. But a largely compliant media, the political acumen of the strategists behind PM Boris Johnson, Britain’s penchant for rentier capitalism and credulity in the face of promises of ‘trickle down’, and, the new regime’s opportunity to ‘love-bomb’ regions ‘with a few infrastructure projects’ (Brown, 2020) may tend to obfuscate these.

The United Kingdom itself may yet prove to be the real lost territory of ‘Brexit’ – having become something of an invisible Kingdom through the process. Despite the claims of the ‘Brexiters’ to be its true guardians and patriots, and press and political portrayal of those who wished to remain in the EU as ‘remoaners’, ‘traitors’ and ‘saboteurs’, it seems to have been those who wanted to leave the EU at any cost who adopted the most cavalier attitude to the territorial cohesion and future integrity of the state to which they claim to be most loyal. At the time of writing the UK state as presently configured is perhaps not definitively ‘lost’ even as the storm clouds gather. However, it is bound together by a teetering state territorialism which seeks to draw political legitimacy from an unrepresentative territorially organised majoritarian electoral system which seems increasingly overwhelmed by the kinds of pressures and schisms outlined in this essay. In January 2020 former Prime Minster (2007-2010), Gordon Brown, for example, issued a stark warning that ‘The risk is that “getting Brexit done” is leaving Britain undone and, by destabilising the careful balance between the Irish and British identities in Northern Ireland, threatening the very existence of the United Kingdom’ (Brown, 2020). The insistence of the UK government on no extension to the ‘Brexit’ transition period beyond 31 December 2020 despite Scottish and Welsh arguments that this would be a sensible course of action in order to avoid imposing extra challenges for businesses during any recovery from the coronavirus pandemic (BBC News, 2020), does little to assuage these centrifugal dynamics. As the UK enters the third decade of the 21st. century, from a territorial perspective at least, it arguably presents not so much an image of ‘Britannia Unchained’ as one of ‘Britannia Unhinged’.

1. Their future leader, and ‘Brexit’ cheerleader, Boris Johnson, had earlier written on the subject of the

‘modern British male’ in the *Spectator* magazine, that "If he is blue collar, he is likely to be

drunk, criminal, aimless, feckless and hopeless, and perhaps claiming to suffer from low self-esteem

brought on by unemployment." See: <https://fullfact.org/online/Boris-Johnson-working-men/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Key Cities Group <https://www.keycities.co.uk/> Centre for Towns - <https://www.centrefortowns.org/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and

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