

# The Deep Story of Leave Voters Affective Assemblages: Implications for Political Decentralisation in the UK

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## Abstract

*How do British Pluralist traditions need to be re-imagined in order to address the issues at the heart of the Brexit vote? This paper will use qualitative research about why Britain voted for Brexit to examine this question. The paper interrogates the question that we require a more decentred local government at a community level in order for people to feel both represented, and able to participate. Firstly, it will analyse the values, attitudes and beliefs of Leave voters who participated in the study, and situate them in terms of the affective assemblages of symbolic meaning, ideas, beliefs, values and emotion through which they imagined themselves and their community. It will examine the 'deep story' (Boler and Davis 2018) through which participants affective responses are situated into inherited historical cultures and traditions, exploring where participants located themselves in relation to others and their particular cultures and traditions. In the final part of the paper, I consider what this means for British pluralist traditions at a local and community level in a post-Brexit polity. I find that the Leave vote signals and symbolises a turn to the traditional Nation State as the political space that can protect and care for individuals who long for control over their worlds. This is potentially at odds with their expressed desire stronger democratic engagement.*

Keywords: Brexit, Assemblages, Political Decentralisation, Local Government, Pluralist traditions, Nation State.

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## Introduction

Given the seismic shift that happened in British politics following the vote to leave the European Union on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016, it is understandable that there has been much academic discussion about the reasons that people voted to Leave, what this means for the UK, and what the options are moving forward. There is little dissent in the scholarship that Taking Back Control; Sovereignty; and immigration played a large role in the campaign, and that voting decisions that were taken on this basis (Henderson et al., 2017; Goodwin and Millazzo 2017; Virdee and McGeever 2018; Pencheva and Maronitis, 2018). However, we currently understand little about what these symbolic markers were connected to, or the affective assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Ahmed 2004) within which they were situated in and which can help us to understand the particular historical traditions or ideologies which underpin individuals voting decisions. This can help us to better consider what Brexit means for British pluralist traditions, which is vital if the UK is to be able to plan for the future. Locating historical traditions and ideologies within an affective assemblage is useful as it can help to elucidate the complex knowledge constellations and emotional responses underpinning what people *meant* when they stated their intentions to Leave the European Union.

Furthermore, little scholarship addresses what the vote to Leave means for local government and political decentralisation. Quite aside from the fact that this is an often neglected policy space, local systems of democracy are important because the word 'control', paired with calls for greater democracy, signals a desire to be more able to influence ones immediate surroundings and environment. The locality is a key site to enable this, providing relateable problems and (hopefully) clear routes to be able to address these concerns (Willett and Cruxon, 2019). However, when Brexit scholarship addresses devolution, it does so with regards the constitutional questions raised by the repatriation of powers from Brussels to Westminster, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Young, 2017; McGrattan and Williams 2017; Reid, 2017; Birrel and Gray, 2017). This is of real concern, as highlighted by Parliaments' Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee in their recent report entitled '*Devolution and Exiting the EU*' (PACAC 2018). The majority of the report focusses on questions with regards to the devolved nations of the UK. Indeed, the Committee's original intention was to explore this issue. However, as expressed in the report the MP's came to realise that the assymetric devolution of powers with regards to England has created its own set of issues. The problem is that amongst the four main nations of the UK whilst Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland have their own devolved apparatus of governance, this has not happened in England. Moreover, the Westminster-centric nature of England has led many regions to feel unable to make their voices heard in an increasingly centralised political system (Willett and Giovannini 2014; Mycock 2016) Consequently, in 2015 and under the Localism Agenda (Wills, 2016) the UK government embarked on a 'devolution' agenda, offering limited decentralised Executive decision making, usually involving the creation of a Mayoral role, to some cities (such as Manchester) and regions (such as Cornwall) (Mycock 2016; Willett 2016; Kenealey 2016; Giovannini 2016).

PACAC's report argues that a failure to address the English Question risks increasing the disconnect between English people and politicians, and that there should be greater consideration given towards extending the decentralisation of power and funding to some parts of England, including questioning whether this should extend to whole areas of competence, rather than 'piecemeal powers and

functions (PACAC 2018: 30). However, to date, although some scholarship has addressed devolution within England, and examined the 'English Question' (Willett and Giovaninni 2014; Prosser et al 2017), and the National Association for Local Councils is conducting research into the opportunities for their members in the future, analysis about what political decentralisation should look like in a post-Brexit environment have not yet been forthcoming. This is an important oversight. Regardless of the urgency of the need before the EU referendum, the vote to Leave the European Union precipitates so many changes, that British pluralist traditions around representative democracy at all levels, from Parish Councils, Principal (local) Authorities, to the machinery of central government will be impacted in some way. This is the issue that this paper will address.

I take the question about why people chose to vote to Leave the EU in order to explore the deep story of the affective assemblage of traditions and ideologies which underpinned the popular decision. I use material from individual and group interviews and a qualitative questionnaire conducted 7-10 months after the referendum, to understand the key factors behind the result. I use the analytical tools provided by Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) and the affective assemblages of Deleuze and Guattari (2004) to examine the 'deep story' (Boler and Davis, 2018) through which participants affective responses are situated, to locate the historical cultures and traditions that interviewees drew from. Finally, I consider what this means for political decentralisation in England, and how British pluralist traditions need to be reimagined in order to address the problems at the heart of the vote. In the paper, I find that the Leave vote signals and symbolises a turn to the traditional Nation State as the political space that can protect and care for individuals who long for control over their worlds. These persons did not ask for more political decentralisation (which might actually be imagined as a threat to the Nation), but political decentralisation might be a useful policy response to the lack of control that they articulated.

### **English Nationalism, British Pluralist Traditions, and the Vote to Leave the EU**

Current scholarship about the rationale behind the Leave vote finds that it was about much more than simply taking back control, immigration, sovereignty, or economics (the Left behind). Instead, it was also about the nation, and how the nation-state was imagined. Over the next section we will see that the vote has been interpreted as an appeal to a national level of British pluralism, and voters were simultaneously asking to be protected by the nation state, and were seeking to protect *it* from attack from a European Other. However scholarship attends to analysis of the vote itself, but provides little understanding about the meanings underpinning the vote, or discussion about what this means for how to shape pluralist traditions in a post-Brexit future.

In its attempt to understand the Leave vote, scholarship has become very familiar with a number of binary categorisations. For example, we 'know' that Remainers tended to be younger, better educated, and more 'cosmopolitan' than Leave voters, who are also characterised as the 'left behind', economically and culturally (Arnorsson and Zoega, 2018). This has ended up meaning that Remainers have been able to readily construct Leavers as older, 'cultural dinosaurs', enabling further assertions of Leave as the regressive choice against Remainers progressive globalism (See also Jennings and Stoker, 2017). This has led to the creation of a binary between the imagined retired, reactive, angry and parochial leave voter, and the young, well-educated, cosmopolitan Remainder – although these stereotypical characterisations do not hold up to scrutiny (Dorling, 2016).

Some have also pointed out the geographical differences in the voting patterns in the devolved nations. It is well documented that Scotland and Northern Ireland returned a Remain majority, whilst England and Wales had a Leave majority. Indeed, Henderson et. al (2017) claim that England's large Leave vote was instrumental in the referendum result. Spatiality is visible in the concept of the 'left

behind', whereby some leave voting individuals and regions have 'lost' in an era of economic globalisation and geographical mobility (Becker et al., 2016; Los et al. 2017). This speaks to the deep level of inequalities of income and opportunity that exist throughout the English part of the United Kingdom (McCann 2016). People from poorer regions or social groups were imagined as being more ready to need to blame, scapegoat, or 'other' migrants and transnational institutions such as the EU (Travers 2016) in an attempt to make sense of, and assign causality to, their difficult life circumstances. However, directly translating the results of the referendum with regards to regional economic or power inequalities is not this straightforward. As results mapping shows us, there is no direct correlation between poor regions and a Leave vote, and voter mapping shows us only that there was a general tendency for the South of England (but not the Southwest) to vote Remain (University of Oxford, 2017), or that there is a tendency for younger, Remain voters to live in cities, and more conservative, Leave voters to live in towns (Jennings and Stoker 2017). Therefore, the interpretation of Leave as a vote of the economically disenfranchised Left Behind is too simplistic.

Nevertheless, this story tells us about a British pluralism that has been divided long before the EU referendum enshrined those divisions and made them plainly visible. Sovereignty, migration and taking back control (Henderson et al., 2017; Goodwin and Millazzo 2017; Virdee and McGeever 2018; Pencheva and Maronitis, 2018) operated as symbols amongst a large proportion of the voting population, that could only gain purchase if they were able to resonate (see Connolly 2008) with this section of the public. Resonance as a concept relies on the acknowledgement or echo of similarity and familiarity. Consequently, we can extrapolate that a feeling of *not* having control or power over how to shape an uncertain and difficult world resonated with voters because at some level, this was familiar and similar to their experiences of being able to shape their worlds. In turn, this suggests that for some reason, the institutions of pluralism from within the English part of the UK at least, had *not* been able to incorporate such people. This is a situation that scholars of nationalism have long recognised to be problematic for the body politic (Gellner 2008; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) Instead, their disenfranchisement was able to find acknowledgement in the insecurity, uncertainty, and lack of control underpinning the use of the symbols of Sovereignty, migration, and taking back control (See also Willett et al. 2019).

What is interesting however, is in the way that the Leave vote did not translate into a critique of British government, either in terms of its most recent policy – which had been characterised by Austerity and largescale cuts to the public sector – or to the traditions underpinning the institutions through which pluralist governance is undertaken. This is despite that regional inequalities have deepened over recent years (Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, 2019). Of particular poignancy, is that the Brexit vote is frequently imagined as part of the wave of populist, anti-elite voting patterns that has characterised election campaigns and results throughout much of Europe and the United States (Hopkin, 2017). Hopkin (2017) argues that Brexit needs to be interpreted as being about inequality, and that people felt that political elites no longer were able to represent them. In such a situation, one might expect that the political elites that would draw fire would be those of the national government, who are closer to home and more visible. But this is not what happened. Instead, the elites that were called into question by largely English voters (Henderson et al. 2017), were those from the European Union. Further to this, Bonacchi et al (2018) use an analysis of social media to find that shared Leave memes tended to utilise aspects of history and heritage in order to support their pro-Brexit stance, including images that recalled myths of origin and resistance – such as Boudica and World War 2, indicating that Leave supporters were mobilised by historical imaginings of the nation.

The use of symbolisms that recall British national histories, suggests that the nation or elements of nationalism were significant factors underpinning the result. The salience of the nation state as a

territorial unit for governance and as an umbrella for identification is interesting here. The story of the modern nation state describes its arrival as a liberal defender of the rights and liberty of the individual (Hampshire-Monk, 1992). Here, the nation literally acts as the sovereign protector of the individual, and will act to guarantee human freedoms. In this regard, the nation state is able to ensure security for its citizens, and Polyakova and Fligstein (2016) note that citizens tend to look to the nation state in times of hardship or uncertainty. On the other hand, the European Union was able to be constructed as a transnational and post-national form of identification (Zhang and Lille 2015; Curtis 2016), which rather than having the protective attributes of the nation, was instead *bullying* the nation. Here, we have an interesting double movement whereby the nation is both protector, and in need of protection (Willett et al, 2019). These concerns are echoed in what Pencheva and Maronitis (2018) describe as the 'Fetishization' of sovereignty as a concept, which they interpret as both a means for the individual to 'take back control', stemming from collective feelings of economic and cultural anxiety and vulnerability. The visibility of immigration within the campaign also speaks to the types of nationalism being utilised, and anticipates the rise in racism that has been experienced in the aftermath of the vote (Virdee and Mcgeever 2018; Protopopova 2018). Consequently, with regards to British pluralist traditions, Brexit emerges as a resurgence of, and emphasis on, national levels of government. In the next section, I use this to sketch an outline about the emerging deep story of Leave voters affective assemblages, which will be our frame of analysis.

### **The Deep Story of Leave Voters Assembled Historical Traditions.**

In developing the affective assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari (2004) owe a debt to the post Epicurean affective atomism of Spinoza, and the phenomenologies of Bergson (2004) and Merleau-Ponty (2012). Consequently, and in common with Foucauldian (1998) discourse, the assemblage has a language to consider the impacts (affects) and therefore the connections between and amongst assembled objects, institutions, ideas and things. Although the mobility and mutability of the assemblage means that these connections are always subject to change, the concept of affect and the use of phenomenology ensures that past impacts and broken connections leave a residue, or trace in memory. In this way, the past continues to affect the present.

To translate this to the human world of material culture and ideas, this means that it is impossible to isolate a phenomena in the present. For example, the vote to leave the EU is imbricated in the multiple and mobile memories of ideas that ripple, resonate, and reverberate throughout the cultural and political assemblages through which voters made up their knowledges and beliefs (see Connolly 2002). To borrow from Bergson (2004), inherited cultures and traditions are utilised by individuals and groups, in order to be able to navigate and make choices in the present, and thereby create a future. Because the past remains active in this way, we can never understand the present without understanding the way that inherited traditions are utilised (see Bergson, 2004)

Boler and Davis (2018) discuss histories as a 'deep story' which creates particular affective 'scripts' that guide and prescribe how individuals perform (or should perform) their actions. Here, the decision about how to vote is characterised as a performance, which is attached to the affective metaphors of the nation, national sovereignty, immigration and a desire for more control. The feedback loops between temporally horizontal and the vertical affective symbolic markers of cultural deep stories, operate as affective eco-systems between the symbols, objects, ideas and institutions within the affective assemblage. An analysis of the affective deep story underpinning the cultural heritages and traditions of Leave voter assemblages within the context of British pluralist traditions, needs to be able to understand the affective ecosystem underpinning how voters had come to imagine the traditions and world within which they are situated; and how this impacts on their present experiences.

Sarah Ahmeds (2004) analysis of the embodied affects of emotion can help us here. Ahmed considers the way that words and the particular usage with which we associate them, have the capacity to generate emotional responses. Quite literally, feelings 'stick' more to some embodied surfaces than to others, and this stickiness helps to ensure that they can readily transfer to other bodies on impact. For example, words such as 'terrorist' are better able to stick to bodies within an affective assemblage that already contains symbolic markers that are culturally constructed as potential terror threats (such as male, and Islam), rather than those that are not (such as 'Christian', or 'white'). For our inquiry, we would want to explore the emotional responses that are generated by the affective ecosystem, and the responses that this both relies upon and generates.

So far in our inquiry, we appreciate the ongoing salience of the nation within Leave voters affective assemblage, and we understand some of the symbolic markers underpinning the campaign and vote. However, we still don't understand what British pluralism *should* look like into the future, particularly with regards to political decentralisation. Partly, the problem is that beyond stereotypical characterisations, we have little real understanding about the inherited historical cultures and traditions of the deep story of Leave voters. In order to do this, I will now turn to empirical material exploring voters justifications for their Leave vote, in an attempt to understand the affective assemblages and deep stories (Boler and Davis, 2018) through which voters imagined their worlds.

### **Research Methods**

As a qualitative study and in common with a grounded theory approach to research (Charmaz 2006; Strauss et al., 2008), the data makes no claims to representativeness. What it does reveal is some of the complex interconnections between the symbolic markers utilised and the assembled deep story of participants inherited traditions. The empirical work was conducted in Cornwall in the far Southwest of the UK, between January – April 2017, 7-10 months following the referendum. The research was part of an ESRC Impact Accelerator project to understand why regions with high levels of European Union Structural Funding support voted disproportionately to Leave. Due to resource constraints we were only able to have one case study region for this in-depth study. Cornwall was selected as a strong example for research into structural funding, but it also forms an insightful case study into an analysis of British pluralist traditions with regards to devolution and local forms of government. Cornwall has had a long campaign calling for more political decentralisation (Willett and Giovanini 2014), and in this context, one might have understood that devolved governance would have been a significant factor for some of the 56.5% of individuals who voted to Leave the EU. However, the region had also campaigned hard to be able to statistically qualify for the highest levels of structural funding, winning on the basis of a mobilisation of local identity (Willett, 2013) so it was likely that others would feel more appreciative towards the EU for financial reasons. Further, and directly related to this particular inquiry, as one of the first of the nominally English regions to receive a 'devolution deal' when they were initially offered in 2015 (Willett, 2016) one might assume that Cornwall would provide some unique insights into the links between devolution and the vote for Leave.

This study directly explores the perceptions of voters themselves, using three focus groups totalling 15 participants, and nine one-to-one interviews to inform the development of a qualitative survey. Interview questions were very similar to those used in the focus groups. Initially, leave-voting participants were recruited from within the business and Cornish cultural communities. Later, we used snowball sampling (Flick, 2006) for a final group of participants. Similar to Dorling (2016), many of the 24 Leave voters interviewed were well educated, had professional careers, and were well-connected; challenging 'left behind' explanations for the Leave vote. From the data gathered, the

team was able to identify common themes, discourses and narratives that were used to inform the qualitative survey in the final research phase.

This paper predominantly draws from the qualitative survey, which utilised largely open questions. This was not designed as a representative sample, but provided a means of collecting narrative responses from a broad cross-section of Leave voters. The survey was shared on social media, and email lists of business, local government, and cultural organisations. In addition to demographic details, participants provided anonymous responses to a series of questions focused upon their perceptions of the EU and why they voted 'Leave'. The survey was open for a 4-week period, and received 186 complete narrative responses (defined as persons who responded to all or some of the narrative questions asked) from Leave voters.

As a starting point to making the survey into an assemblage of participants deep stories surrounding their inherited traditions, I began with the direct question about why each person voted Leave. Next, I looked at the frequency for each justification, the ways that participants connected different justifications, and the kinds of emotional responses that were generated regarding governance and traditions in the UK. Finally, I cross-referenced this data with other responses that participants had given regarding questions about the issues that were most important to them and their family, the most important issues to Cornwall, and the most pressing challenges for the UK. This helped to consider how the responses given for Leaving related to challenges that they experienced or imagined closer to home.

### **Leave Voters Affective Assemblages**

In order to construct an affective assemblage of the Leave voters in this study, I will begin by looking at what the assemblage contains, and the connections that participants constructed. This includes words, ideas, signs and symbols; the emotions that this generates; and 'stickiness' - the ways that some words and ideas stick to particular meanings. Many of the coded symbols and categories discussed here overlap. Occasionally a response only fitted one code. For example, '*A vote against David Cameron. I thought that things could not get any worse*' only fitted the 'anti-establishment' code. Others incorporated multiple codes. To illustrate, '*to regain control of decisions that affect the UK. ie, fishing/farming/lawmaking*' fits the codes of control; strong Britain; fishing/farming; and is UK facing. '*Immigration, anger over EU laws being able to override English Court decisions*' fitted the codes of immigration; democracy; EU facing; and identity. Given the importance of political decentralisation, devolution, and local identity to Cornwall (Willett 2016), it would have been logical to assume that there would have been a considerable number of responses which foregrounded the remoteness of the European Union, and the importance of more localised forms of government. Indeed, for the purposes of this particular analysis, this was the first code that I developed, and is the only one created deductively (the remainder were entirely grounded in the responses received). However, this was not the case. Instead, only 3 out of the 186 responses fitted into a 'better to control locally' category. One response even went so far as to say that they wanted '*to see more control of what happens in Cornwall to remain within the UK...*'. The fascinating thing here is that the participant does not imagine returning control over the local to the local level, but to a national tier of government.

Although some codes were very prominent within the assembled ideas, none were found in more than half of the responses, indicating that none completely dominated the assemblage. This is interesting, because frequently Leave voters are imagined as following similar (and reasonably narrow) justifications. The most frequent reason given (79) related to a feeling of a loss of control – more commonly, that the UK had lost control to the EU, implying a need to regain it. Next, an aspect

of immigration was mentioned 77 times, very often paired with control, or control over law-making. For example, *'uncontrolled immigration, loss of sovereignty'* or *'being told by the EU how to run our country'*, *'the costs of being part of the EU – could be better used in this country, immigration'*, and *'want to be ruled from Westminster not by EU. Border controls, accountability – accounts haven't been signed off in a year'*. Codes of medium levels of occurrence include democracy (44); that the EU is a waste of money (43); for a strong Britain (the EU makes Britain weak) (35). Less frequent, but still notable, public services (21); sovereignty (18); EU Federalism (14); Economy (13); Fishing and farming (10); Identity (10); Freedom/independence/autonomy (8). The European Court of Justice received 6 mentions, and aside from 2 responses referencing Germany and World War 2; and one the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Greece was the only country that was explicitly referred to outside of the UK. This was by 5 persons, 2 of whom were of the 4 identifiably left wing Leavers.

The strongest assembled connections were between Democracy/Loss of Control/ and Strong Britain (The EU makes the UK weak). Frequently, these were bound together so tightly that it was difficult to disentangle them. For example, this emotionally evocative response claims that *'I saw the EU as (an) undemocratic, power hungry monstrosity that wanted absolute control in every little thing. It had destroyed job value in the UK, and totalled Greece'*. These three codes are so interwoven that they slip and slide into one another, requiring a complicated and nuanced judgement in order to differentiate between them. Another respondent states that they wanted to *'to take back control of how we live and spend our money etc, and to freely be able to make decisions based on our own needs and not that of the EU'*. This clearly indicates a predominance of loss of control and Strong Britain, but although it was not coded as being about democracy, in the desire for control over making 'our' own decisions, democracy is implied and infused throughout the response. The fluidity of the word 'democracy' as it permeates the assemblage is also recalled over words such as 'sovereignty'. Despite its prominence in both the campaign, and in the later scholarship (Pencheva and Maronitis 2018), it was only used as a word 14 times. In all of these instances it was coded as 'control', but it could also have been about democracy (for which it was only coded once, in a statement that specifically mentioned problems with what were characterised as *'unelected'* decision-makers). Aside from these, there was little regularity between the word 'sovereignty' and any of the other symbolic markers.

Given the stickiness of the attachments between these three signifiers of democracy/ control/ and strong Britain, the next step is to consider the extent to which they collectively permeate throughout the assemblage. Here we find that 131 of the 186 responses to the question of why the participant voted to Leave recall one of these identifiers. The entangled democracy, control and strong Britain (the EU makes the UK weak) operates as a theme that reverberates throughout the assembled ideas, signs, and symbols. In desiring more control and more say, they evoke a feeling of currently being out of control, and of current powerlessness. For 47 of the participants, this response spills over into the highly emotive language that was used, such as *'sovereignty – not to be elected by an unelected foreign elite'*. The majority however, articulated their lack of control in a more restrained, rational manner. For example, *'1. Europe had too much hold on legislation, 2. Much of what we are allowed to do is driven by Europe, 3. Much of what we are not allowed to do is driven by Europe'*. The final point of interest here is that many of these articulations appear to be resentment-driven. In the affective register of the assemblage it is the EU that stops Britain from being able to do the things that it needs to, and for which participants desire more democracy and control. The EU is implicitly or explicitly the threat which stops the nation from being able to both maximise its capability, and to protect its citizens.

Immigration was directly referred to 77 times, which whilst well below half of all respondents, it has played a prominent role in how the Leave vote is narrated (Arnorsson and Zoega 2018; Jennings and



Stoker 2017). In order to understand this better, Sara Ahmed (2004) talks about the link between immigration discourses, and an emotional desire to 'protect' the nation (and citizens), which provided a useful frame to begin the analysis of these codes. I tried to find a general theme from within the assembled codes around 'immigration'. The strongest pattern was with regards to a combination of pressures on public services (16), and that the EU is a waste of money (13). We can imagine these as closely related, assembled around a statement such as 'public services are stretched, we need more money for them, so we need to ensure that we are very careful to spend the money that we do have, wisely'. When these codes are combined, allowing for repetition, 26 (about 1/3) of immigration statements seem to indicate that their concern about immigration is contiguous with a desire to both save money, and that public services are being over-stretched. Placed together in this way, participants appear to have been creating an affective economy of emotions based around feelings of insecurity about the capacity of the State to take care of its citizens in the present and future; a sense that citizens security is being threatened by an uncertain economy; and related, that there is not enough money in the system in order to spend resources too freely. The next most frequent code related to immigration is that of 'strong Britain', implying that the country *should* be able to repel or defend itself from the imagined threats to citizens economic security, posed by migrants. To illustrate, one participant stated that *'uncontrolled immigration (is) causing stress on public services and infrastructure. The UK is hamstrung by EU over-regulation and bureaucracy'*. Another claims that their vote was influenced by *'immigration. We can't look after the people that we have here already, there isn't enough housing, schools etc... We pay an extortionate amount to Brussels and that money could be better spent elsewhere'*. Relatedly, 16 of the 21 people that raised the issue of public services, also mentioned immigration, or a need to control borders. At ¾ of public services codes, this represents the most consistent link within the study.

Considering the prominence of 'immigration' within wider narratives about Brexit and the Leave vote (Arnorsson and Zoega 2018; Jennings and Stoker 2017) it is interesting to try to understand this point better. At times however, this raises further questions. For example, if we examine the Leave vote rationale in comparison with what people feel about their personal, local, and national concerns, only 6 people state that immigration is a problem in their region, and only 5 state that it is important to themselves and their families. The figure doubles in response to the factors that are of concern to the nation (the UK), when 11 persons name it specifically. However, when applied to their justification for leaving the EU, 41 persons name the word immigration (as opposed to alluding to it, for example, by talking about being able to control UK borders). This suggests some degree of inconsistency between rationale and the impacts on the participants own lives. Instead, the assembled reasons behind the Leave vote seems to have developed its own deep and resonant affective economy around immigration which then spills out into people's daily lives and concerns, rather than being something that is grounded in daily experience

If we turn to problems that are of most concern to participants daily lives, we see that some aspect of social or economic security permeates the overwhelming majority of the responses. Some examples include *'health, affordable housing'*; *'population control, jobs for locals'*; *'1. Economy 2. Environment 3. Education'*; and *'young people to have an aim for the future in life/jobs. More choice of jobs and future prospects.'* In contrast to 'immigration', a strong affective economy (grounded in lived experience) about the necessity of good public services and accessible jobs reverberate across responses. These are issues which impact and affect the daily lives of the individual, the locality, and the region – which sometimes attach to the affective economy around immigration. It is from this point that public services slip into and spill over through the Leave rationale. Indeed, in general, it is only the responses which do not recall and resonate with services, jobs, and financial security, that tend to be the ones that reference directly soundbites from the referendum campaign. For example,

in response to areas of concern to the UK, one participant stated '*to get our sovereignty back. Get our Parliament working for the good of our people and not as a bandstand for MPs*'. What this makes visible, is that the rationale behind the leave vote starts not in human experience, but from within the campaign itself. Where lived experience does come into it, is in the fusion between the abstract concepts related to the nation, such as democracy, and sovereignty; and the lack of control that people feel with regards to the uncertainty of their daily lives. But what does this mean for the local, local democracy, and devolution? For this, we now turn to what this means for the scripted deep story that participants are telling, and the inherited traditions that they draw from.

### **The Leave 'Deep Story', Inherited Traditions, and Devolution**

From the above analysis we see that on a temporally lateral plane, participants were personally concerned about social and economic security, which they had attached to symbols of immigration, democracy, sovereignty, and a sense of loss of control. Within these assembled ideas, a script develops whereby the European Union becomes interpreted as the cause of the loss of control, and the agent of policy decisions that exacerbate personal concerns about social and economic security. Consequently, the EU is readily available to be constructed as an 'other', becoming what Connolly (1992) describes as the threat which stops me from being myself. Although the concrete problem is embedded in personal experience, it is turned into an abstract question in order to find a solution. To accomplish this quite difficult task, we turn to our memories (Bergson 2004; Connolly, 2002) or what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) might characterise as the assemblage of our pasts. The individual and collective is looking for an answer to a problem by examining the solutions to similar events that have happened in the past. To illustrate, immigration was recorded as being imagined as the cause of low pay and irregular work by Robert Tressell (2005) over 100 years ago in his work *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. It is these sentiments which were echoed by Enoch Powell in his 1968 Rivers of Blood speech. We see that immigration is a culturally available narrative as an explanation for instability and uncertainty.

This may indeed be so, but we see something else within this deep story. In looking for an abstract solution, we see what Ahmed (2004) also observes; that the nation becomes simultaneously something to be protected by, and to protect. Immigration and the EU become contagious objects which attempt to breach the surfaces of the nation, to infect it, and disable it. As a consequence the angry citizen seeks to repel the source(s) of the problem, doing battle with it, and ejecting the impurities which have become the cause of the individual's uncertainty. This might be interpreted as a nationalist move, but in contrast, the urgency to protect the nation is embedded in personal insecurity, and the need for the survival of the individual self.

British pluralist traditions do not exist for the sake of their being. Instead, the Liberal Democracy on which they are based was designed as a defender of the rights of the individual (Hampshire-Monk, 1992; Polyakova and Fligstein 2016). In other words, our temporal understanding about what the nation exists to do, is that this is the space that needs to protect the individual, personally. This is especially salient during times of uncertainty, when the nation is imagined to come into its own, in this role. The democratic traditions of the liberal nation are tightly bound up in this, incorporating the capacity for people to be able to control and shape their worlds (Polyakova and Fligstein 2016; Curtis 2016). This means that there is little distance between symbols around lack of control, insecurity, and the nation. Consequently when Leave voters demanded that the nation be protected, they were also concurrently demanding that *they* be protected, too. The 'fetishization' of sovereignty (Pencheva and Maronitis) relates to the overt or implied fear experienced by Leave voters, and transferred to the EU.

So if the deep story of Leave voters is one that is embedded in inherited traditions around the importance of the nation state, where does this leave devolution? As discussed above, despite that the research was conducted in a region with a really strong tradition in campaigning for devolution and more localised governance (Willett and Giovannini 2014), calls for more localised decision making were unexpectedly quiet throughout this study. In contrast, significantly more (although still a statistically few) people named Federalism as justification for their vote. This recalls the Europe of the Regions policy, at the heart of the regionalism of the early 1990's (Keating, 2008) whereby strong (EU led) regional governance was interpreted by some as being part of an explicit desire to maximise the strength of the region, at the expense of the nation. In some instances, this was characterised as contributing towards the demise of the nation-state.

Within the zero-sum assemblage of the Leave vote, whereby if one site of power is strong, that means that another is weak, to strengthen the weak makes the stronger, weaker. In this type of narrative movement, a devolved or decentralised government is going to weaken the nation. Clearly, at a time when the threatened individual is seeking protection from the nation, this will be imagined as being damaging to the very unit of government that is required to be strong. Consequently, greater devolution, or even decentralisation, will be imagined also as being threatening.

The next question relates to whether, regardless of the popular will, derived from a deep story embedded in a pluralist tradition of the primacy of the nation, should post Brexit policy abandon the devolution agenda. To understand this we have to look at the problems that permeated the Leave assemblage. The key thematic resonances were around democracy/control/strengthening Britain, and these were founded on fear and insecurity about social and economic stability, and about the services on which they rely. Part of the justification for Othering the EU related to the perceived democratic difficulties for the individual to have any impact on transnational policy. The question for contemporary British Pluralism relates to the extent to which national institutions have the ability or the capacity to best address the society, the economy, and public services. In order to do this, significantly more research needs to be conducted in addition to that which already exists about the efficacy of executive and legislative decision-making with regards to local economies and public services and how this can amplify the capacity of the nation. Furthermore, we also need to understand how to facilitate greater popular involvement in local politics, ensuring that at whatever level of government about which we speak, that people feel that they are able to contribute towards shaping the things that matter (Wills 2016; Willett and Cruxon 2018; Prosser et al. 2017). A wider understanding of political decentralisation and devolution as an important entry point into making changes to our communities (Wills, 2016) might be a useful tool in this process.

## **Conclusion**

This study tells us three things. Firstly, in situating the reasons given for the vote within the context of Leave voters deep stories of inherited traditions, it provides us with a far more nuanced understanding of what have become familiar tropes and soundbite responses behind the Leave vote. The scholarship recognises the totemic nature of 'taking back control', 'Sovereignty', and 'immigration', within the voting process (Henderson et al., 2017; Goodwin and Millazzo 2017; Virdee and McGeever 2018; Pencheva and Maronitis, 2018). This study shows that although immigration was very present, it did not dominate responses. Control, and sovereignty did however, and were fused with the implication that the EU weakened the UK and thereby made it more difficult for the nation to protect the citizen from the social and economic insecurity that participants either experience, or are fearful of experiencing in their daily lives. These people were not so much Left Behind (Becker et al., 2016; Los et al. 2017; McCann 2016), as fearful that the societal benefits of good public services and housing were not or would not be available for them in times of need.

In order to meliorate this fear, individuals sought protection in the nation state (Hampshire-Monk, 1992; Polyakova and Fligstein 2016). Rather than characterise national elites as having failed them (Hopkin 2017), participants attached their concrete and lived fears to an abstracted inherited pluralist tradition that emphasised the primacy of the nation state as the space to offer protection and security from a hostile world. It is legitimate to question the grasp that this narrative has on how the contemporary globalised world operates (Jennings and Stoker, 2017), or that alliances can amplify rather than reduce power. However it is clear from this study that the turn to national symbols observed by Bonacchi et al (2018) in the referendum campaign, or the racism of the aftermath (Virdee and Mcgeever 2018; Protopopova 2018) arrives through a process whereby the individual feels the need to 'protect' the nation just as much as they want to be protected by it. This might be characterised as a 'looking backwards' to a time when the State was imagined as strong and familiar, rather than the looking forwards to a new (and different) transnational world order (Zhang and Lille 2015; Curtis 2016). In times of fear and uncertainty, familiarity is preferable as we rely on memory to navigate the world (Bergson 2004; Connolly 2002), and the trodden path is easier to follow.

For the evolution of British pluralist traditions by extending devolution throughout the English regions, this is complicated. Of all the nominally English regions, it would have been expected that the case study area of Cornwall with its history of campaigning for a Cornish Assembly, would have provided significant responses calling for greater political decentralisation. However when the Leave voters interviewed here called for greater control, they meant that they wanted the *nation* to have more control. When Hopkin (2017) argues that people felt that their elites no longer represented them, we might qualify that these were imagined as European elites, rather than national ones. In the context of the turn to nationalist traditions documented above, it might be argued that stronger regional government might be interpreted as weakening the nation state. However, as PACAC's 2018 report explains, the asymmetric devolution within the UK has created its own set of issues with regards to people feeling able to shape their localities, and there is evidence that people have felt increasingly frustrated at not being able to make their voices heard in an increasingly centralised British political system (Wills, 2016; Willett and Giovannini 2014). In this situation, it would be logical to imagine that there is significant space and potential appetite for greater political decentralisation, if it can be communicated to the public that this can enhance the control that they have over the services that this study clearly shows are so important to their daily lives. However this would need to be handled carefully, so as to explain that this can amplify the capacity of the nation state, rather than reduce it.

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