Brexit Writings and the War of Position over Migration, 'Race' and Class

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It has been rightly suggested that Brexit is not a single, one-off event but a process that exists on the surface in many arenas of everyday life. Part of this process is represented by *writings* on Brexit 'or rather the vote to leave the EU' as 'a particular kind of thing' that needs to be explained. One of the 'many explanations' is Brexit as 'a revolt or protest on behalf of those "left behind" by forces of neoliberal globalisation' (Anderson and Wilson, 2017, 2). This short essay critiques an influential example of the genre: David Goodhart's (2017a) *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (henceforth *TRS*). Although presented as, among other things, an explanation of the outcome of the UK referendum on EU membership in 2016, the post-liberal, nationalist view espoused in *TRS* can be seen as part of a Gramscian 'war of position' (Forgacs, 1988, 431), an ideological play for hearts and minds (Jones et al, 2017, 75-78; Stephens, 2016).

Goodhart presents his book as a robust study of social trends that need to be better understood by the 'political class' (*TRS*, 233). However, it does not take much of a critical eye to see it as a marshalling of arguments designed to persuade its readers of a particular politics. Six months after the triggering of Article 50 by the UK government, Goodhart deployed a summary of the book to support the position in ongoing debates over the form of Brexit that, in certain circumstances, 'the vast majority of Brits could come together to make a success

of that journey over the cliff edge' (Goodhart, 2017b). The central contention of *TRS* is that there are two prevalent ideological perspectives in Britain, which Goodhart refers to as 'Anywhere' and 'Somewhere', and which map in approximate and complex ways onto two groups of people in society, to which he gives the corresponding labels, 'Anywheres' and 'Somewheres'. While he attributes a range of views to each group, Goodhart's central point is that Somewheres are unhappy with the pace and extent of 'cultural change' since the 1960s, in particular with the growing ethnic diversity of Britain, mass immigration, and the legacy of multicultural policies. Anywheres, on the other hand, are comfortable with such change because they are mostly university graduates, and, therefore, under the UK's residential university system, much more likely to live away from the place they grew up in than Somewheres. '[M]y two tribes capture the reality of Britain's central worldview divide' (*TRS*, 23). The Brexit vote, as Goodhart would like his readers to understand it, was a 'revolt' by Somewhere people against the dominance of policies and social trends with which Anywheres are comfortable; he portrays it as Somewheres taking back a degree of relative power in the national polity.

Goodhart does not pretend to be a Somewhere himself, defining himself as an Anywhere in terms of his lifestyle and the circles he mixes in. The latter come across as elite – for example, he describes an Oxford College dinner in 2011, where he sits between the then cabinet secretary and the Director-General of the BBC (*TRS*, 15). Moreover, Goodhart tells readers that he voted Remain in the 2016 Referendum, and mentions his association with Blue Labour (*TRS*, vii). There is an insidiousness in Goodhart's self-presentation in *TRS* and in his presentations of the work in the media and elsewhere. He tries to sound reasonable and open-minded increasing the chances that the disproportionately white, male, public-school educated media colleagues who provide him a platform may see him as 'one of us' and all the more authoritative for it.

Yet while Goodhart tries to use *TRS* to gain readers' trust for a new common sense, his own racialised authoritarian paternalism is never far from the surface (see Mishra, 2017). With an air of regret for a lost past Goodhart argues that what he calls the British 'traditional elite' is 'much less likely than in earlier generations to remain connected to Somewheres through land

ownership, the church, the armed forces or as an employer' (*TRS*, 4). Elsewhere he adds that 'neither the affluent nor employers feel the same obligation towards '*their*' working class that they once did' (*TRS*, 6, emphasis added). Goodhart pays far too little attention to the common inheritance among all working class people of the devastation of de-industrialisation, and the fallout of the 2008 banking crisis (Khan and Shaheen, 2017). Instead he furthers divisive ideas about 'central and eastern Europeans some of whom act like commuter immigrants and make no effort to mix while others are settling and integrating well' (*TRS*, 130). Although elsewhere he acknowledges that integration is a two-way process, the breezy language of 'act like' and 'make no effort' seems to place the onus on recently arrived international migrants. Goodhart does not have it in for international migrants and minorities alone. He asserts that education and geographical mobility are the key divides in British society, attacking universities, academics and students, while acknowledging at the same time that approximately 50 per cent of young people now attend university – hardly an elite minority. Goodhart's nationalist anti-immigration rhetoric and his dismissal of what he refers to as 'globalist leftism' (2017c) contain echoes of late nineteenth century battles over migration, 'race' and national identity in Britain to which I will return.

First though it is important to look more closely at Goodhart's use of 'we'/ 'us'. Goodhart is particularly concerned that those whom he sees as further removed in cultural terms from what he calls 'the mainstream' (2017, 131) should not receive equal treatment or status in the national polity. Although he does not define what 'mainstream' is in the UK context, he implies that nationals of eastern and central European EU countries are further removed from it than western and southern European ones, as are, not only international migrant people of colour from Africa and Asia, but, at some points in the book, their descendants too, regardless of their citizenship.[i] This is especially shaky ground for Goodhart, given that he himself is the child of an immigrant (his mother moved to the UK from the US). The implication is that white citizens of the USA and their descendants give rise to few, if any, issues of 'trust and familiarity' attributed to the arrival of non-white people, especially people arriving from countries in the Global South. Citing Robert Putnam, Goodhart argues that trust

and familiarity are reduced by high levels of immigration and ethnic diversity 'especially when the people arriving come from places that are culturally distant; absorbing 100,000 Australians is very different to 100,000 Afghans' (*TRS*, 22). Among other things this assumes that the Australians are 'white' and the area they are 'absorbed' into is mainly 'white' too. Such deeply problematic assumptions form part of what Emejulu (2016) has called the 'hideous whiteness of Brexit', that has been disguised in part by social scientists' misidentification of leave voters as primarily 'white working class' (see Bhambra, 2017).

The explicit concern in *TRS* with immigration to the UK from the global south portrays a hierarchical view towards humankind: 'Newcomers, *especially* refugees and *people from developing countries*, often draw out more than they pay in at least in the period after arrival and do not always have the same sense of allegiance to a country's norms or its national story – an indifference that was actively encouraged by first wave multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s. This makes many people feel uneasy' (*TRS*, 121-2, emphasis added). Goodhart does not expand on or try to justify his assertion that newcomers 'from developing countries' are likely to be less committed to the 'norms' and 'national story' of the country they arrive in than people coming from other countries. Like the statement that this can make 'many people feel uneasy' this implicitly continues the theme of lending greater priority to white than black and minority ethnic citizens (see Bhambra, 2017).

The problems with Goodhart's national 'we' is revealed again later in *TRS* in a discussion on the response to a question in an IPSOS MORI poll in 2004 – that was commissioned alongside his well-known 'Too diverse?' piece – regarding whether people agreed that 'other people seem to get unfair priority over you when it comes to public services and benefits' (itself clearly a leading question). The question was followed by another regarding what 'type of "other people"'. Asylum seekers and recent immigrants were 'most likely' to be named: Goodhart writes that '[asylum seekers and recent immigrants] are most obviously strangers to us, and we are less likely to identify with their position or be sure they will share our norms. But few people cited established minorities – implying that they were now regarded as part of the tapestry of the country' (*TRS*, 122). Yet, if the latter sentence were true (setting aside the question of

regarded by whom?), why single out certain groups of newcomers as 'most obviously strangers to us'? The devil here is in the 'us' word.

The reader learns more about Goodhart's 'us' from how he discusses racisms in the UK. First, rather than accepting that there are different kinds of racism, he insists on a narrow definition. Secondly, even within this definition, he seems to want to explain rather than explicitly oppose it: 'And even when racism is racism, when it does involve dislike of or contempt for a particular group, it is not just about skin colour or even religion as such, it is about what skin colour or distinctive dress represent in terms of different values or behaviours or traditions and the challenge they present to mainstream norms' (*TRS*, 32). Again 'mainstream' is undefined but here it implies the privileging of a white British and Christian lens. It can be no surprise that the United Kingdom Independence Party is, for Goodhart, not a racist party but one 'representing a grumpy and sometimes intolerant strand in the British public' (*TRS*, 222).

Goodhart's treatment of Islam and Islamism is illustrative of the way he approaches racisms in the book. In a section on 'integration' that pushes a strongly assimilationist perspective, Goodhart turns to Muslims and, using the label 'Islamism', criticises 'some younger Muslims' for 'combining piety with enjoyment of many of the freedoms of liberal British society' (*TRS*, 130). This reads to me like a Somewhere ideology – and suggests that Somewhere-isms are seen by Goodhart as ok for non-Muslims but not so for Muslims. Islamism is used here as a weasel word to demonise Islam and Muslims just as it was in the 2000s by influential journalists Nick Cohen and Michael Gove[ii] (Rogaly and Taylor, 2011, 209-210). Neither hate crimes committed against people judged by their appearance and/or location to be Muslim, nor widespread structural discrimination against Muslims seem to warrant direct attention by Goodhart. Instead, continuing the thread of identifying those who do or do not belong to the 'mainstream', Goodhart implicitly defines Muslims, and minorities more broadly, as outside it: 'mainstream public opinion is… more wary of Muslims than other comparable minorities', going on to justify this because of 'greater daily segregation of Muslims, the unavoidable (sic) association with the jihadi violence of a small minority and the recent "grooming" scandals', casting those speaking out against anti-Muslim racism as either whingeing, exaggerating or

both in a 'relentless narrative of Muslim victimhood and Islamophobia' (*TRS*, 130).[iii]

Anti-Muslim racism was evident to varying degrees in the campaigns for the UK to leave the European Union in 2016, though appeals to it were not necessarily direct: 'while many believed the focus of the UKIP-inspired Brexiteer's ire was mainly white Europeans from the mainland undercutting British workers, it was clear to many within that formation itself that breaking with the EU and "taking back control of our borders" also represented an important opportunity to limit the numbers of Muslims entering Britain, Muslims whose culture many of them believed was incompatible with being British' (Virdee and McGeever, 2017, 6). Explicit racist imagery was nevertheless used, for example in the notorious campaign poster showing Nigel Farage pointing at a large number of people, mostly of colour, implicitly mostly Muslim, crossing the border between Macedonia and Slovenia in October 2015, with the headline 'Breaking Point', followed by the words: 'we must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders' (see Figure 1 in the essay by C and D in this Symposium). Other Leave campaign leaders, such as Boris Johnson, attempted to distance themselves from the poster, but their high profile involvement and repeated mantra of 'take back control' gave a veneer of respectability to the strong presence of anti-Muslim and other racisms in the Leave campaign as a whole – anti-Muslim racism was also strongly present in the doomed Conservative Party campaign to have Zak Goldsmith elected Mayor of London the month before the referendum.

As Virdee and McGeever (2017, 3) argue, 'the current crisis in Brexit Britain has been so overdetermined by racism' (including, but not only, anti-Muslim racism). In a recent book, Satnam Virdee (2014) makes a further, crucially important, intervention into historizing the relation between racism, racialization and class in Britain, and it is to that work, and the historical perspective it provides for understanding Brexit writings, that I will now turn. Racism in the form of white nationalism has a long history in the UK, one closely intertwined with the history of the country as a colonizer and with shifting postcolonial immigration laws, and modes of governance of racialised minorities (Bhambra, 2015; Hall, 2017). Virdee's *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*

establishes clear analytical links between colonialism and the construction of whiteness and national belonging in Britain. The book covers a two hundred year period and, *contra* the apparently unchanging identities of the older 'white working class men' that Goodhart identifies as '[o]ne core group of Somewheres' (*TRS*, 3), offers an important reminder that the focus of racialized outsiderhood in Britain has shifted over this time, from Irish Catholics through much of the nineteenth century to Jewish immigrants – known as aliens – at the end of that century, and people of African and Asian heritage throughout (see Lentin, 2017). [iv] Arranged chronologically, the book is especially helpful for its discussions of the mainstream political party responses to the arrival in the UK of Jewish people escaping racist pogroms in Tsarist Russia in the 1890s and early 1900s. It reproduces cartoons that could have been directly transplanted from the Leave campaign material used over one hundred years later. The cartoons warned of the dangers of immigration claiming Jewish 'aliens' were undercutting wages and taking the jobs of working class British citizens, just as Irish Catholic workers had been accused of doing in the 1830s (Virdee, 2014, 26). The debate over Jewish immigration led to the first legal restriction on immigration in Britain with the passing of the Aliens Act in 1905.

It is particularly instructive to read of the debate among socialists at the time between those supporting a white nationalist perspective and those taking a non-racialised view of working class struggle and identity. Referring to the former, Virdee (2017a, 368) describes how 'socialist nationalist support for Jewish workers attempting to organise themselves remained lukewarm at best'. The anti-semitism was barely restrained. Dockers' leader Ben Tillett wrote in a letter to the London Evening News, for example that: '"Our leading statesmen do not care to offend the great banking houses or money kings... For heavens' sake, give us back our own countrymen, and take from us your motley multitude"' (Cohen, 1984, 28, cited by Virdee, 2017a, 368). Virdee quotes similar sentiments supporting the trope of a Jewish conspiracy behind imperialist wars expressed by Keir Hardie's newspaper *Labour Leader*. '"Wherever there is trouble in Europe, wherever rumours of war circulate and men's minds are distraught with fear and change and calamity, you may be sure that a hook-nosed Rothschild is at his games somewhere near the region of the disturbances"' (Cohen, 1984, 20,

cited by Virdee, 2017a, 369).

Throughout his book, Virdee shows how 'each time the boundaries of the nation were extended to include more members of the working class, this was accompanied and legitimized by a racialised nationalism that excluded more recent arrivals' (2017b, 15). He also reveals how this was contested within the labour movement often by people whose heritage connected them to historical or contemporary experiences of racialization. Goodhart's Brexit writing in *TRS* defines such people as outside the British 'mainstream'. If the 2016 Leave campaign can be classified (using Gramsci's application of military terms to politics) as a full frontal 'war of manoeuvre', *TRS* can logically be understood as engaging in a 'war of position'. Like several other Brexit writings it forms part of 'a phase of "revolution-reaction" or passive revolution… which follows upon a revolutionary offensive'. As part of a war of position *TRS* thus links to Gramsci's notion of hegemony in the senses of 'class alliances, "molecular" ideological and political work, consent' (Forgacs, 1988, 431). Goodhart's 'mainstream' has had enough of ethnic diversity, is 'wary' of Muslims (and is therefore not Muslim), and is more culturally 'distant' from some immigrants than others. Goodhart thus promotes not just a hegemony in terms of what he himself calls 'national fellow citizen favouritism' (2017a, 228), but a racialized hierarchy. His stated intention is to champion people he calls 'Somewheres', whom he has identified as being without influence over the direction of society. Yet through his definitions, his elisions and his silences, he furthers a divisive agenda, pitching his chosen 'mainstream' against racialized outsiders. As Roediger (2017a) has emphatically shown in the US, the idea promoted by Michaels (2006) and others that identity politics has weakened class solidarity badly misrepresents the historical record (see the contribution by C and D to this Symposium). The US context and the Trump presidency are of course distinct from the UK and the Brexit process. However, Trump's election too has inevitably spawned its own discursive battles, with some writers as divisive and inaccurate as Goodhart in their deployment of the ethnicized category 'white working class' (see Roediger, 2017b for an excoriating critique of Joan C Williams' book of this title). In spite of their elusiveness,[v] multi-ethnic solidarities among working-class people are the most effective route to redressing social, economic and political injustice for all

workers. And, as Virdee has argued so convincingly, in British history it has often been racialized outsiders who have taken the lead.

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[i] For example, on pages 128 (in the quoting of an 'eloquent short parable' by Franz Timmermans regarding the lack of 'integration' of the 'children (and grandchildren)' of 'many migrants'), 131 (in the critique of writers who 'give no special weight to the ethnic majority') and 132 (in the apparent favouring of an arrangement of 'neighbourhood demography so that people from the ethnic majority can retain a sense of ownership of the area').

[ii] Gove later became a prominent Leave campaigner and is, at the time of writing, a minister in the UK government.

[iii] See Warsi (2017) for an excellent critique of liberal commentators defining Muslims as outside the mainstream.

[iv] For a powerful illustration of the negotiated, contingent process of claiming whiteness in the US, see Kelley (2000).

[v] On which see Roediger (2017a, chapter 6) and Featherstone (2012).