

“Taking back Control”:

Whose, and Back to When?

Logie Barrow

Logie Barrow (Bremen) interprets the Conservative Party's approach to Brexit as a response to the traumatic loss of control suffered by the party during the 1940s-1970s. In the longer term, the Conservative Party has often attained and held onto power by promoting class-integrative myths, such as national greatness. Thus, Brexit may be seen as an attempt to contain class struggle by promising an enlarged 'national cake' to be shared in by all, at the cost of external others. Barrow argues that the Tories' have been cushioned from the impact of their often misguided economic policies by Britain's economic power, but that the country's radically altered position in a globalised world makes this strategy more difficult to pull off. In the full version of this article, published separately in our new, 'The Long Read' format, Logie Barrow further shows that the Conservatives' handling of the Covid-19 crisis may be seen as symptomatic of the party's neoliberal agenda, which includes privatisation, overcentralisation, and elitism, and as an opportunity to conceal the economic impact of Brexit behind the impact of the pandemic.

From around 1700, Britain's political culture (unwritten constitution; self-image as moderate; other features so familiar to 1st-year students), often hard-fought but never destroyed, has been cushioned in economic success.

To indulge in reductionism: over generations, the Tories have helped British capitalism as demagogues and enforcers. But, had too much of the economic content of their demagogy become reality, it would have harmed overall profitability and stability. Such has repeatedly been the paradox since the mid-19th century. Now, for the first time, political triumph is knocking on the economic door. The main reasons for this are sometimes centuries old. But let's begin with decades.

Interpret Brexit as part of a decades-long Tory endeavour to regain control of the British nation, after the post-1940 decades of factory-floor 'anarchy' climaxed traumatically in industrial and broader insubordination during

1967-74. I investigate, firstly, the shaping of much current debate by old Tory slogans and ideas and, secondly, why those remain so effective. Here I argue Britain has, off and on since 1846, been economically cushioned from the full effect of Tory policies over trade, partly because those policies were never fully applied and salutary lessons never materialised. Over generations, repeated failure or near-failure of Tory trade-agitations has left room for functionalist theories to flourish: 'above party', a ruling class can more or less accurately and profitably define its interests.

How rare exceptions may be is unclear. But currently we have a pretty clear one: some sort of Hard Brexit (leaving the EU with no agreement) seems increasingly probable on 31st December.2020, though not yet (2.8.2020) certain. Let most capitalists and pro-capitalists, not least *Financial Times* journalists, be as sane as you wish; politically they are as defeated as anyone else. Their occasional compliments to Labour (though not to Corbyn) during the late-2019 Election-campaign measure their desperation. Let us, as much as we like, see the EU as 'merely' the world's third-largest trading-bloc, squeezed between its American and Chinese rivals, while politically dominated by Germany and hence doctrinally cramped by ordoliberalism (for a definition, see below). Even so, a desirable alternative to that is surely not an archaic and territorially rickety state of a mere 66-million inhabitants, leading some 'free-trade' crusade against all three blocs. So far, recruits for that crusade have been rare: trade-agreements number less than twenty,

mostly with mini-states, plus a few middling ones such as Switzerland, South Korea or South Africa, with Turkey allegedly pending. Japan was added during September: a big fish but no big partner. Whether we see any Brexit as bringing catastrophe or mere medium-term hiccoughs and other indelicacies, its apparent imminence suggests how easily a dominant faction can hasten economic sado-masochism by debauching electoral majorities on irrelevancies. In Britain, the main irrelevance has, since 1940 at the latest, been nostalgia.

That presupposes believing you have lots to be nostalgic about. So Brexit depends on an imperialist whitewash of the bases of past success. If you romanticise these, you may obscure how unrepeatable they are. Revulsion aside (the point here is not to cheer for the immersion of one individual slaver's statue in Bristol Harbour), 21st-century Brexitanians can overestimate their room for manoeuvre the more easily, the more they forget the lasting benefits to English/British investors in piracy followed, from the late 17th century, by super-exploitation of generations of slaves and of early industrial workers. So, what is Hard Brexit based on? Near the end, we will hear Boris Johnson interpreting his December 2019 Election-triumph by indeed gesticulating back more than three centuries. Thereby he showed himself, not only morally obtuse, but also a bit madder than anyone fantasising, say, that the Chinese Admiral Zheng He (d. 1435) had had successors, one of whom had 'discovered', say, Bristol near the start of the Wars of the Roses (1455) or more profitably 'discovered' Lisbon after colliding

with Portuguese ships busy ‘discovering’ down the West African coast. However crassly, Johnson was hankering after the half-millennium that, into the 20th century, had seen ‘white’ empires enjoying the world-historical initiative. Was he aware how absurdly out-of-date he had become during his lifetime? Presumably not: why else would he have invited so many top diplomats to Greenwich on 3rd February to hear him indulge his historical fantasies and slavery-free myopia?

At the time of writing, all countries are grappling with Covid-19, plus its economic effects. But only today’s dominant faction of Tories could so much as threaten to add a Hard Brexit to that mixture. We can imagine ways that threat might dissolve. But, till it does, we must proceed on the assumption it will be realised. Even now, predictions seem premature as to how Johnson and his ministers would administer it to the electorate: few if any Brexiteers can be so saintly as never to have dreamt of hiding Brexit’s effects behind Covid’s. True, that may currently seem as easy as hiding a mouse behind an elephant. But the mouse may have grown mightily by January 2021.

We will see below how the ineptitude of Johnson and his ministers supplied the elephant with growth hormones. Brexit was also perhaps relevant to some of the government’s idiocies over Covid-19. Proportionately to population, these helped make Britain the most Covid-hit country in Europe, if we omit Putin’s much-censored Russia. They are bound to reverberate for years. In sum, we will see some effects of Brexit on Britain’s struggle with Covid, whereas Covid’s effects on Brexit are

still speculative. Admittedly everyone, masked or not, is now choking on air with dangerously high speculation-content.

Regaining Control: The Roots of Brexit Rhetoric

To summarise our opening trauma: from 1971, Edward Heath’s Tory government legislated to tame the Do-It-Yourself militancy that had flourished during three decades of full employment. Repeatedly, those laws boomeranged. In February 1972 and with coal-stocks thinned by a miners’ strike, much of Birmingham’s labour movement had marched to the gates of a coal-depot at Saltley (also called Nechells), and forced their closure. At the end of July came the release of five unofficially striking dockers’ leaders from Pentonville prison, after similarly widespread solidarity-strikes. In 1974, another miners’ strike – almost national, though still unofficial – persuaded Heath to decree a working week of three days. He then called an election as to “Who Rules?” – and narrowly lost. Rather as the French and Russian revolutions had been the defining nightmares of much ruling-class politics in most countries during subsequent generations, the years 1972-4 function similarly in Britain.

The 2019 Election saw some children and grandchildren of post-war Britain’s ‘insubordinates’ voting Tory if only for the sake of “getting Brexit done.” But who is “taking back control”? So far, the sole candidates are Tories, disproportionately ruling-class ones made nonchalant by centuries of imperial luck, but still uneasily aware that the post-war decades

had cost them much control.

Today's Brexit rhetoric is self-escalating: by now, if you support some 'Soft' Brexit, you may rank among the traitors. What fuels that rhetoric? One component is neoliberalism. Like many successful 'isms', this has many versions.¹ But they all boil down to: 'private enterprise = good; public services = bad.' Its worldwide influence has been growing since the 1970s, not least in Britain. Of course, in 2008-10 when states bailed out the international banking system, most neolibs applauded *that* public servicing. On Britain's relation to the E.E.C./E.U., they have taken a range of stances. Here, though, we must follow the extremists: increasingly disruptive from the 1990s; dominant with Boris Johnson from 2018, where we meet an unusual hollowness about aims, i.e. about the point of 'brexiting' at all. Commentators have wrongly personalised the uproar of 2016-19. The point was not the poker-faced Theresa "Maybot" *versus* the Incredible Boris Hulk, but rather that both were gorging the electorate on tautologies. May's "Brexit means Brexit" was duly succeeded by Johnson's "Get Brexit Done". Suspicion of abstraction is part of the Anglo-British self-image. Yet seldom has concreteness been so lacking. This vacuum remains more than a negotiating poker-ploy. So far, it has been filled mainly with counterfactual waffle.

Overall, Johnson may have assumed Britain could manoeuvre between Hsi's China and Trump's America. But he has antagonised Hsi. His reasons are only officially about political principle, given that he resumed arms-deliveries to Saudi Arabia during the same

days as he antagonised the Beijing regime over Hua Wei and Hong Kong. As for Trump, those who rely on him tend to finish like bullfrogs hitching a ride on an amnesiac alligator. And even were some less monomaniac candidate to win the White House, the price of negotiating a trade-agreement with America's agrochemical, pharma and private health lobbyists is sure to include trashing Johnson's paeans to the National Health Service, which the Tories have anyway been stealthily privatising throughout the 2010s.

In detail, too, vacuity often reigns. Not only for EU negotiators does it seem to make dealings with Johnson's team 'shambolic'. Even on the central issue of Northern Ireland, Johnson needs to reconcile some contradictory promises of his own: by 7th July, his International Trade minister turned out to be deadlocked with Brexit minister Michael Gove. In the *Guardian's* summary: "Johnson's border plans risked smuggling, damage to the UK's international reputation and could face a legal challenge from the World Trade Organisation." (O'Carroll 9.7.2020) WTO rules would govern trade with a Hard-Brexit UK – unless Brexitania were to exit from even that, as one or two Tories hint. Can all this be blamed merely on the personalities of so many ministers – even of Johnson plus his PR-genius, Dominic Cummings – or is some longer-term hollowness at work? (The Cummings dimension should not be overdone: despite his arrogance and weirdness, he is not the first Downing Street PR-adviser to enjoy a pivotal role: remember Alasdair Campbell?).²

This is where our decades call up centuries. Tory intellectuals – from Benjamin Disraeli (flourishing from the 1840s to 1881) to Enoch Powell (fl. 1950s to ‘70s) to Jacob Rees-Mogg (for him, see below) have viewed their function as being to peddle myths that are ‘good’ in the sense of class-integrative, the better to fight ‘bad’ ones that are not (ranging from any kind of socialism to ... unforgettably revealing gaffes such as those we’ll hear from Mogg and an acolyte of his). Britain is now Brexitania because more and more Tories, reacting to that 1972-4 climax of class trauma, adopted Brexit as a ‘good’ myth and handed it on to eager successors.

They added it to two elements from their party’s long-term ideology. The first inflects neoliberalism in terms of a Tory ideal at least as old as Disraeli: making Britain a ‘property-owning democracy’. In 1967 – and this is why I date the climax of wartime insubordination as starting in that year – the Tory head of the Greater London Council, Horace Cutler, provoked a huge though unevenly militant movement of Council tenants by raising their rents. As sweetener, he reconfigured that Disraelian rhetoric as a right to buy your Council flat. This made him a practical pioneer of neoliberalism before the word. Only during the mid-1970s was Margaret Thatcher, Heath’s successor as Tory leader, to follow him in theory and, in Downing Street from 1979, to start putting that theory into practice. During the 1980s, she added shares in industries she was privatising. Many initial purchasers were humble: “Tell Sid”, one series

of advertisements for those shares shouted from bus-shelters in at least working-class areas. True, market-fluctuations and other inequities will long ago have gutted most of the gains humble purchasers made. But, at whatever speed that gutting occurred, every original purchase privatised and shrank the state’s economic role: neoliberalism’s central aim.

More immediately for some, it sweetened Thatcher’s smashing of the most disruptive of working-class organisations. Whether her victory over the National Union of Miners (1984-5) was closer-run than that over General Galtieri in the Falklands/Malvinas during 1982, the two triumphs helped make her premiership the longest for generations: 1979-90. But her ideology of individualist self-reliance was the more ‘positive’ aspect of her opposition to every form of collectivism, not least to trades unions.

One Anglophone wisecrack associated with the 2008-9 crash was “never let a serious crisis go to waste.” Whatever its origins, Tories such as David Cameron’s finance minister (‘Chancellor of the Exchequer’ from 2010 to ‘16) George Osborne certainly followed it. Osborne’s ‘austerity’ starved almost any public initiative, from social care to libraries to youth clubs to police and prisons to (as we will see) the National Health Service (NHS) – and left two brand-new aircraft carriers minus planes able to land on them and minus the intended radar. (Putin was heard to giggle.) Even worse, Brexiteers’ euphoria at the 2016 referendum-result encouraged what I have identified as their prioritising of ideological purity over economic

prosperity – to the point of seeing crisis as even worthwhile: out of the chaos there would emerge a ‘Singapore-on-Thames’, freed from the E.U.’s (I would say, watery) ‘social dimension’ and from E.U. financial controls. As often, our ‘Singaporean’ Tories have been aided by the British constitution: something critically defined in 1978 by John Griffith, one of the few left-wing professors then remaining at the London School of Economics, as “no more and no less than what happens.” (Griffith 1979, cf. also Gee and C. McCorkindale) Since the 2016 referendum, May and Johnson have exploited that flexibility, perhaps to destruction, by basing so much on tautological (logically circular) abstractions about Brexit.

Not that the dominant version of neoliberalism within the E.U., i.e. German ‘Ordoliberalism’ or budget balancing, is always more benign than versions dominant in Brexitania: remember Greece...Italy...Spain? Nor were the EU’s vaccinal preparations for a pandemic beyond criticism (Boffey 25.5.2020; Galbraith and Azmanova 23.6.2020). But in practice, the two forms of neoliberalism usually overlapped. Symbolically, both Osborne and Friedrich Merz went from government to roles at the world’s most influential hedge fund, Black Rock. Nevertheless, at least in core territories, the E.U. has so far enforced social rollbacks less speedily than Osborne did in Britain. Even more vital during decades of unprecedentedly global capitalism: any kind of internationalism-from-below may have more chances via E.U. terrain than via Brexitania’s disintegrating archipelago.

For the latter, the BBC has quietly launched a new synonym, “the four nations”, for today’s United Kingdom. Does this designation force everyone to see Northern Irish Unionists, i.e. Protestants, as a ‘nation’ alongside England, Scotland and Wales? (If so, that could re-invigorate a nest of hornets that scratched a few of Britain’s far-leftists off and on from the 1970s: one third of the residents of the Six Counties are Catholic and see themselves as Irish). Either way, the BBC’s phrase somehow rings late-Hapsburgian nowadays.

The second element of Toryism’s long-term ideology – unease or anger at any trading-constellation Britain currently finds itself in and soon perhaps even the WTO – also takes us back to the history of the party. Prominent or not, many Tories (and their ‘Liberal Unionist’ recruits such as Joseph Chamberlain) emphasised trade-questions from the late 1890s. Why seek out such risky terrain? Answer: because you concentrate minds on how to enlarge the national cake. Thereby, you upstage ‘mere sordid squabbles’ about how to divide and distribute it: again ‘good’ myths in preference to ‘bad’. And individually, you may even rise to become the next cake-chef.

Unless you are fixated on your own imperial past, you know that any trade agreement presupposes independent partners, i.e. people from outside your own brain. Nowadays, few if any big ones are likely to be as easily bullied as before the mid-20th century. Either you are top nation, as Britain during the centuries that ended in January 1942 (with Singapore’s fall to the Japanese): subordinating almost any country

to your industrialisation, outgunning rival Euro-Atlantic slave-systems, repeatedly screwing Ireland and India, winning two wars against China to confer the blessings of Free Trade in opium etc., grabbing Egypt as hinterland to the Suez Canal, swallowing most of Southern Africa for minerals – the list is notoriously longer. Or else the top nation tolerates you. Once the U.S. had helped frustrate Britain’s 1956 attempt to reconquer Egypt (the so-called Suez affair), Britain’s rhetoric on its ‘special relationship’ with its strongest ex-colonies was a transparent figleaf for dependence on them, even for ‘independent’ nuclear rocket-systems. And yet that naked junior Emperor proclaimed his foreign policy as blessed with three foci: Atlantic, Commonwealth and European. We will hear Johnson’s Greenwich gesticulations as an attempt to obscure the European with – nostalgic posturings.

Here he was in a Tory political tradition but, this time, with the economic stakes far more actual. From the late 1890s to the 1930s and again after 1945, our Tory trade-reformers were repeatedly slapdash in their relation to reality.

First, slogans such as ‘Empire Free Trade’ or ‘Tariff Reform’ presupposed enthusiasm or at least acquiescence from the ‘White Dominions’ (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and, from 1910, ‘White’ South Africa). But that was far from automatic. Worse, trade-agitations threw firms, industries and even regions within the U.K. against each other. And indeed ‘Tariff Reform’ and similar slogans set the Tory party itself in uproar and compounded

its landslide defeat during 1905-6 (till the 1918 General Election, constituencies did not vote simultaneously). Interwar, the same slogans cost votes during the General Elections of 1923 and ‘9, and a bye-election during 1930 (Paddington South, where a Tory lost to an Empire Free Trader, backed by the owners of the *Daily Mail* and *Express*, and leaving Tory premier Stanley Baldwin contemplating resignation). True, the 1932 Ottawa Agreement — to keep tariffs between the Dominions lower than those with anywhere else — satisfied many Tariff Reformers, perhaps most. But others continued agitating through much of the decade. (Baldwin had recently compared tariff-reforming newspaper-owners to “harlots”, for seeking “power without responsibility”).

Second, within the very different situation of the 1950s, Tories tried to prevent or to stunt convergence between France, Italy, West Germany, and the Benelux countries. When ‘Europe’ politely ignored them, they felt slighted. But they retained a fear far older than the Spanish Armada (1588) of anything like a European super-power. Picking the best enemies to fear is part of statecraft. The more the Tories can blame evil Europeans for the economic effect of Brexit and the less they can play them off against each other, the more easily will they revive a ‘good’ myth older than the United Kingdom.

Of course, the Tories’ were neither alone in their Euroscepticism, nor have all Tories been Eurosceptics. On trade policy, Tories remained the prime post-war movers – after Suez, increasingly *towards* Western Europe and

soon the E.E.C. Indeed, when Heath's treaty for entering the E.E.C. came to the Commons for ratification (1972), 291 Tory M.P.s supported it with a mere 39 voting against. Even today, some Tories are Remainers, in internal or external exile from their party. Additionally, from the early 1990s, many of those Tories who labelled themselves 'Eurosceptic' had a line similar nowadays to that of Orbán and Co.: against 'widening' or 'deepening' the E.U., though not for leaving it.

But Labour, too, could assist in its own ways. Of course, during the nine decades before the advent of Tony Blair as leader in 1994, the Labour spectrum was broader than that of Europe's Social Democrats. But most of Labour's policies, whether on racism or imperialism or foreign policy, seldom more than tinkered with Tory architecture. (The main exceptions were sympathy for 'white labour' in South Africa and, consistently or not, distaste for Fascism,). What about Hugh Gaitskell, using his speech as Party leader at the 1962 annual conference to warn that joining the E.E.C. would end "a thousand years of history"? By then, Gaitskell was resoundingly no friend of comrades to the left of him, but when Harold Wilson's government held a referendum in 1975 on whether to remain in the E.E.C. (supported on the day by 67% of those voting), most leftwingers argued for leaving. A special Party conference had voted two-to-one for that, with one-third of Wilson's ministers among the majority. (He himself stayed neutral, more convincingly than Corbyn was able to, over four decades later). During the actual campaign,

leftwingers such as Barbara Castle (very rare among Labour MPs for campaigning against mass-torture in Kenya) even shared a platform with Powell, the Tory M.P. whose April 1968 "Rivers of Blood" polemic against non-white immigrants was still endearing him to many a working-class voter. (This was Powell's most successful 'good' myth, unlike his late-1940s proposal to reconquer India). During 1973 and again during 1974's two close-run General Elections, he had cast himself out from Tory ranks by declaring for Labour as the likelier of the two main parties to call that referendum. Some labour movement leftists, in their very different world, feared that Community as an extension of NATO, i.e. as a cover for 'West German revanchism' and/or for America's Cold Warriors. They therefore saw its very capitalist prosperity as making membership even more dangerous than exclusion. Many other labour activists we can see as reformist 'third worldies': euphoric about formal decolonisation and about the British Commonwealth, now that Apartheid South Africa had been pushed out. Many assumed working-class electors would somehow feel queasy about sharing institutions with Continentals. No wonder Labour remained officially for withdrawal from 'Europe' till 1989.

But the years around 1990 saw Labour and Conservatives exchanging their respective internal balance of stances on Europe. Thatcher began gravitating back towards Euroscepticism, in reaction to Labour leaders' enthusiasm for what was coming to be known as the E.U.'s 'Social Chapter': she saw that as a threat to her constructing a neoliberal Britain. True, in the

short term she got too far ahead of her party here. That was one factor that ended her premiership. (The other was massive popular rage against her poll tax, not least in Scotland where it had been trialled). But in the long, those of her ideologues who had previously, as she, applauded Heath’s negotiation of Britain’s entry to the then E.E.C. in 1973, soon joined those who had disliked it all along. From around 1990, those advocating Britain’s disentanglement from almost anything European (except, of course, from NATO which they saw as tethering any European habit of wandering off into neutrality) agitated as abstractly as we have noted, and no less repetitively. But their very repetitiveness, decade after decade, reverberated. By autumn 2019, “five or six” members of a focus-group “in the back room of a drab hotel in Bury”, Lancashire, (Payne 23.12.2019) could present Johnson with his election-mantra, “Get Brexit Done”. Seldom have mantras been so hollow but, repeated *ad nauseam* in response to questions on anything, it worked: boring promises to end boredom were the main factor triggering a landslide.

The Tory party has long been the main venue for neoliberals and Eurosceptics to sing ever more manic duets. One precondition was that Tories and Labour exchanged their predominant positions. By 1998 with Blair enjoying a big Commons majority, no more than 3% of Labour M.P.s supported withdrawal. The majority now saw the E.U. as hopeful terrain for furthering social justice – precisely the perception we have seen turning Thatcher against it, a decade earlier. The E.U.’s ‘Social Chapter’ might be weak; Gerhard Schröder’s

euphoria over “my friend Tony”’s “Third Way” might signal further dilution of social commitment in both their countries. But even the softest social reformism strengthened optimism, partly because all sides had grown accustomed to reform benefiting from a half-century of economic growth. Blairites therefore embraced Thatcher’s ‘Big Bang’ of deregulation in the City of London. During Labour’s mid-1990s ‘prawn cocktail offensive’ in the City, a leading Blairite, Peter Mandelson, famously described Blair’s New Labour project as “intensely relaxed about people becoming filthy rich.” And even New Labour’s love of capitalism contrasted with memories of Thatcher: not merely her degradation of unions, hence of working conditions, but also her gutting of many traditional industries, not least coal.

Imperial luck strengthens the impact of ideology

Here, Brexiteers are stuck in their own “economic farrago of leaving the world’s largest free-trade area in the name of more free trade.”³ That whole farrago is ideological and, as I have more than hinted, ultimately irrational. The escalating duet of Brexiteering with much neoliberalism may nauseate even some neoliberals. But neoliberalism remains a useful politico-economic tool in many countries. So neoliberalisation can bulldoze on, even while individuals try to jump out of the cab. Similarly, as noted, with Tory definitions of ‘Brexit’.

But the incoherencies of Brexit underline a basic question: how can truth-content stay so secondary for so long? One precondition

is: not to collide too painfully with reality. My first argument has been about the importance of old slogans for Tory answers to the mass insubordination that had climaxed during 1967-74. My second, from here, is about generations of non-collision. My third will be about Covid-19 that has, so far, deepened the political solipsism so long endemic among Brexitanians, notably their rulers.

Britain's unusually long-lasting trading advantages are perhaps one reason why Tories have exhibited a greater yen for such agitations and risks: for so long, economic reality offered so much room for political careerism. Between, very roughly, 1700 and the 1870s, Britain had continued as, let's say, the Silicon Valley of an increasingly worldwide economy: not merely the furthest-flung Empire ever, but also planetary capitalism's chief technological motor, hence rule-setter. Centuries of economic invulnerability (even against Napoleon's Continental System, despite major social unrest) allowed, as we will now see, repeated political irresponsibility over questions of trade.

Here, some 19th-century basics are inescapable, however many historians may deride these as 'potted history'.

With the end of a quarter-century of war against revolutionary France (often a continuation of trade-wars against its absolutist predecessor), Tory landowners insisted on restoring protection for agriculture. The year 1842 saw a general strike (the world's first) that overlapped very much with 'physical force' Chartists (for the People's Charter for one-

man-one-vote). After a repressive spasm against strike-leaders, Liberals and Tories competed in conciliating working-class opinion. The Liberals were evolving from Whigs, the other landowner-dominated party. ('Whig' versus 'Tory' had originated from long-half-forgotten polarisations around the 1688 'Glorious Revolution'). They now appealed increasingly to supporters of the free market. Liberal manufacturers and others attracted many 'moral force' Chartists into alliance with an Anti-Corn Law League for free trade in food. In 1846, Tory premier Sir Robert Peel gave in. His reluctant act of realism was speeded by famine in Ireland – though, as a convert to Free Trade, he did nothing to stop that island continuing as a net exporter of food. He turned out to have sprained his party's landed-protectionist backbone, disabling it from office for two decades. Not that there were sobs of working-class pity for landed aristocrats (though, as a novelist, the young Disraeli would have loved to unite aristocrats and workers against manufacturers). Rather, there was nothing to pity aristocrats for: British landowners were not 'due' to suffer from intercontinental food imports till the shipping revolution of the 1880s. The triumph of 'free trade in food' chanced soon after the start of the 19th century's longest boom, burying 'physical force' Chartist warnings that cheaper food would merely encourage employers to cut wages. So the 1840s polarisations over trade were to bring no negative lessons on the risks of changing a country's trade-policies.

Coincidentally, though, the 1880s also highlighted the one-sidedness of Free

Trade with countries like Germany or the U.S.A. that had industrialised behind tariff-walls, and whose industries were now – oh, what blasphemy! – often more advanced than Britain’s. So, while the 1840s’ mobilisations with their dire effect on the Tory Party now merited a mere line or two in school history-textbooks, the time seemed ripe for trade-agitation in another, this time Tory, direction. If Britain was no longer the Workshop of the World, surely it could remain the workshop of its Empire, with the White Dominions concentrating on primary exports to the Motherland.

Trouble was, those Dominions were growing restive at such a role. So again, the agitations from the 1890s to the 1930s for Empire Free Trade brought no negative economic lessons either: this time, not because they succeeded during a lucky juncture (as the Liberals’ 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws), but because their success was at best partial (Ottawa 1932, as noted). So, to almost any voter between roughly 1960 and 2019, yarns from the 1840s to 1930s could again be left to the same school textbooks. Patriotically grumbling about Britain’s trading relations was one way of proving how Tory you were. Those grumblings’ relationship to reality might be incomplete. But, as we have seen,, British realities allowed far more than average room for manoeuvre between economic facts and political waffle ,because, as a *Financial Times* prophet called Simon Kuper (brought up in South Africa and then Uganda) diagnosed during September 2019, “many of today’s Britons ... have forgotten that history can hurt.” (Kuper 19.9.2019)

The Future I: Brexit

We will see how long his present tense survives: coming months may reveal who is “getting ... done” most by Johnson’s Election-triumph of 12th December 2019. Even were ‘Singapore-on-Thames’ a coherent aim, Singapores on almost any other Brexitanian river are surely sci-fi – except, of course, in the sense of further de-regulation of labour-conditions. Conceivably, ‘Singapore’ may also denote ‘technological sovereignty” where Britain leads some merry band of countries against the planetary cybocracies of America and China after loudly rejecting the nearest and weakest of the three candidates, the EU. Yet that version too is a dream: in the commentator Paul Mason’s words, Britain “is not even in the game.” Plausibly, he instances the “abysmal collapse of its home-grown Covid-19 track-and-trace app [...] followed by the revelation that [the government] had invested in unproven satellite technology” (Mason 30.6.20). We are perhaps becoming accustomed to fantasy-based policies.

How is “history” about to “hurt”? How deeply will even Tory brains judder when reality hits them? Does Johnson dream of disengaging from the Hard Brexiteers who helped him into Downing Street? There seem precious few signs of that; but nobody seems sure whether he has ever been capable of average honesty, even to himself nor, as we will see near the end, whether he prizes coherence at all. Maybe the December (in practice, autumnal) 2020 deadline he has announced for ending his E.U. negotiations is no mere poker-ploy.

Maybe it is a promise to Brexiteers to crash out, come what may. Many of his Hard ones are full-throttle Neolibs who believe in a salutary crisis, allowing them to deregulate class-relations back to the 1930's or earlier. We may agree with Paul Mason that the "whole point of Brexit was to deregulate the labour market and reduce social protections and environmental standards, while scapegoating 'migrants' and 'Europe' for everything that went wrong." But he assumes too easily that Johnson and Co. will recognise the pandemic and its economic trauma as barring such endeavours (Mason 6.4.2020). We will also see how far they can divert blame from themselves for Britain suffering Europe's highest death-toll: the first week in July brought a sign that Johnson is seeking one plausible target already (Walker, Proctor and Syal 6.7.2020).

T rue, on winning the December 2019 Election, he did warn his party not to take for granted those working-class voters who had switched from Labour. Yet how he hopes to retain them is anybody's guess: till 3rd February (see below), the sole 'good' myths hinted at were xenophobia – this time against E.U. immigrants –, but no indications of what, beyond that, may promote class integration after Brexit is 'done'. With regard to xenophobia, Johnson's record of wolf-whistling against veiled Muslim women and dark-skinned children bodes ill. But what his offer of British residency to three million Hong Kong residents (1st July 2020) suggests, is anybody's guess – perhaps his, too. Analogous to Johnsonian opportunism, newspaper-owners know sales rise with the unexpected: most London-based newspapers

have sometimes swiftly swung between EU-immigrants-as-spongers-on-welfare and EU-immigrants-as-saviour-of-whole-sectors-of-our-economy (if we exclude the consistently xenophobic *Express* papers).⁴ So far, top Tories have used racist remarks to claim terrain: as if to a building-site where planning permission is still pending. When Powell ventured further with that 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech, Heath instantly sacked him from the shadow cabinet. Johnson currently has Muslims and Hindus in his cabinet. But Powell had been responding to a wave of 'black' immigration. So anti-Chinese racism can perhaps await revival till 'too many' of Johnson's three million begin testing his honesty.

G estures, whether racist or not, may clash with economics. Already, employers in a very wide range of sectors from care-homes to hotels and restaurants have reacted with horror to the government's proposal for an immigration-system that excludes the low-paid. So far, the sole official reply (from Home Secretary Priti Patel) has come strangely from Tory lips: you bosses should raise wages. As Tories have seldom been conspicuous for hiking minimum wages, we can assume her reaction was at best unreflected. So the intention is for British workers to be forced to take more of the worst and least secure jobs, whether or not at wage rates slightly higher than those that, say, Poles or Slovaks have had to accept. As, say, for meat-factories and seasonal agriculture, the dynamics of British hostels and production lines are at least as Covid-friendly as German or ... Singaporean. For Patel to push British

workers into these is, in the negative sense, a ‘Singaporean’ prospect. Indeed it is already more than a prospect: some of the British students and others who have volunteered for seasonal farm-work (perhaps responding patriotically to Johnson’s appeal to “Pick for Britain”)⁵ are reporting grimly on hours and wages worse than promised, on abusive foremen one or two of whom, mafia-like, demand percentages, and on accommodation without running water.⁶ The list feels familiar from *Grapes of Wrath* to ... 2020 Germany.

Medically more directly dangerous, men aged between 20 and 40 are thought to be one major vector within Leicester’s late-June increase in Covid-19 cases. Extreme exploitation in “garment factories and food processing plants” has long been notorious. The at least local word for them, “sweatshops”,⁷ was more widely current in the late-19th century. Workers speak furtively of being told to continue coming into crowded workplaces despite suffering symptoms, and not to tell colleagues about a positive test-result. And on that front too, Patel has criticised those Leicester employers.⁸ Again, is she enunciating something like a principle or merely wolf-whistling?

That keyword of Brexit jargon, ‘sovereignty’, is more than rhetoric: it already informs policy. It was behind government plans to separate Brexitania from Europe’s air-safety authority, to howls of incredulous horror from the industries affected. So far, the horror-struck, whether employers or current and potential employees, seem not to recognise themselves as victims of the salutary shock that at least some

government ministers aim to hit them with. Near the end of February 2020, Mason noted how “the debate over Brexit [had] simply transmuted [from economics] into a debate over sovereignty and immigration” (Mason 24.2.2020). Correct. But, let sovereignty and immigration be the angriest of bulldogs, economics can tug them harshly back on even the longest lead – until perhaps that lead snaps, with results even less predictable.

Worse, in some contexts, the Europeans themselves have used Brexit dogma to disable the basics, not merely of capitalist economics but even of post-1945 defence policy. In 2018, Brexit’s likelihood triggered Britain’s exclusion from the EU’s Galileo programme. This is a system of “twenty-four satellites to provide both an openly available navigation service as well as a highly encrypted positioning platform [...] for public service authorities or the military.” The government promised to replace this with something purely British. That project is now plagued by delays and cost overruns. In March 2020, one unnamed “space industry executive” identified the “problems” as being that the programme had been “launched in the political environment of Brexit, but there has been no discussion among stakeholders about what the requirement is.” A *Financial Times* report summarises the likeliest solution as being to “use openly available signals from US or European satellites to deliver the positioning, while a smaller subset of British satellites would refine and encrypt the data.” That sounds like dependence plus a recipe for occasional blackmail and mutual spying. Meanwhile, one

“industry figure” is left lamenting how “the UK lacks the expertise to judge the industry proposals so everything is taking much longer” (Hollinger and Pickard 1.3.2020). Anyone seeking to disperse dismay among UK firms is reduced to hoping Galileo will obsolesce faster than expected. By then the, as ever, uniquely inventive Brits will of course be ready to bestow the next generation of electronics on a grateful world market.

This seems like fording a stream while overlooking how many stepping-stones have been washed away. In our 21st-century world of large trading-blocks, we may suspect that this most rhetorical of British governments still expects “proud” centuries of Imperial luck to protect it somehow from the realities of Hard Brexit.

Author’s Note

This essay takes into account developments up to 31 October 2020. Mysourcing is overwhelmingly from the *Guardian*, with the *Financial Times* among occasional exceptions. This stems, not merely from the *Guardian*’s audacious decision to avoid imposing any pay-wall, but also from its consistent commitment to investigative journalism. My own disagreements with that daily are miles from Brexit or Covid-19. The *FT* is now the sole London daily available on the European mainland, where Covid-19 happens to find me. For over six decades, I have regarded it as easily “the best capitalist newspaper.”

Editor’s Note

This forms part of a longer study that is being published separately on the Website of *Hard Times Magazine* in our new category, ‘The Long Read’. You can access the full version of the article here:

<https://hard-times-magazine.org/index.php/Hardtimes/catalog/category/thelongread>

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Endnotes

- 1 For two entries into the field: Mirowski (2013), Mirowski and Plehwe (2009); Swartz (2013) on Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. Mirowski’s *Science Mart: Privatising American Science* (2011) had listed at least eleven cumulative criteria of neoliberalism. By now, we can perhaps imagine him wanting to add a few more: his target is mobile.
- 2 I owe this point to Jimmy Grealey.
- 3 Anthony Barnett’s blogged phrase of mid-March 2019. For an apotheosis of that “farrago”, see Johnson’s speech near the end of this paper.
- 4 Morrison 27.9.2019. That the paper also carries the name of the editor, Dr Roch Dunin-Wasowicz, is presumably no claim of joint authorship.
- 5 www.express.co.uk/News/UK dates this appeal (or this report on it) as 27.3.2020.

- 6 BBC Radio 4, 18.7.2020, 06.45 approx.,
Farming Today. That gender dimensions go
unmentioned may or may not be significant
in some ways.
- 7 I owe this point to one very ex-local, the
Vienna linguist Richard Alexander.
- 8 Bland and Campbell 30.6.2020. That
“report” turns out to be a large-print
20-pager by Dominique Mueller from an
organisation called “Labour Behind the
Label”. *BBC News*, 6.7.2020.