**Chapter Six: Nationalism**

The previous two data chapters addressed the formative context for the nationalistic perspectives outlined in this chapter. To begin with, capitalism’s anomalist era in its longue durée was explicated, particularly the industrial age’s relative stability and security. As remunerative industrial employment and a busy seaside resort characterised Steel Town, it was perceived to be expanding socially, culturally, and economically. A modicum of community spirit pervaded the area, as well as a sense of obligation and reciprocity. Perhaps this was a deviation in capitalism’s history; it was not the embodiment of the system’s normal functioning but a transient period to mute support for alternative ideologies that began to grow in the shadow of the early twentieth century. Capitalist crises in the 1970s, though, enabled a system geared around the cold calculations of augmenting profitability to ascend once again, with neoliberal political economy and ideology eventually becoming *doxic*. Emblematic of this in Steel Town was the closure of the local steelworks, identified as the end of the industrial age’s stability and continuity.

Shifting to neoliberalism meant much of Steel Town’s labour market was now characterised by uncertainty and instability. Although neoliberal ideology claimed people were now free to be more mobile and climb the social structure, there was a discrepancy between ideology and reality, not least the presence of unemployment, underemployment, a lack of stable apprenticeships and periods of work to joblessness. The proliferation of targets and overwork intensified a sense that employment conditions favoured employers at the expense of workers. These conditions meant Steel Town’s high street was branded as a ghost town or empty place, with post-social characteristics like egotistical individualism and social atomisation existing as the norm. As ultra-realists contend, context is of fundamental importance in understanding how people think and feel about the social world[[1]](#endnote-1). Therefore, the final data chapter explicates the nationalistic sentiments engendered by Steel Town’s socioeconomic and cultural totality, including dissatisfaction with New Labour, a desire to Leave the EU, discontent with immigration, political correctness and a second referendum, culminating in the collapse of the Red Wall in December 2019. First, it turns to what some respondents regarded as the Labour Party’s abandonment of working-class people in places like Steel Town, further elucidating how history continues to shape the present.

**The Labour Party and politicians**

All participants suggested that politicians were shielded from the working class’s everyday realities. Although they claimed politicians promised the world and often espoused a desire to protect their interests, their pledges were dispensed with once they were elected. Symbolising their sentiments of politicians was an absence of belief, faith, and trust; a deep-seated feeling that all politicians are deceitful, corrupt, and disingenuous. Most of the participants had historically voted for the Labour Party. In recent years, though, they had begun to express their disgust towards the Party and its inability to defend their social, cultural, and economic interests. Despite Steel Town and the broader Teesside region possessing a Labour MP often since the post-war era, deindustrialisation and the ascent of poor employment continued. No matter who was elected, the area continued to degenerate. For some, this discontent started with New Labour, as Pete highlights:

“I looked to the Liberals once Tony Blair came into power. He was an absolute hypocrite, you could just see through him, absolutely abhorrent. To stand there and take us to war on lies, we have been in more wars than enough due to lies. The lies that still get told about Iraq, Afghanistan, nothing gets done about it.”

Emma agrees:

“Blair, I mean, he sided with the American President, Bush. He took us to war. Politicians are just out for themselves, ready for their next career move. Are they really for the working person? I have lost all faith in them. I have now moved to the Conservatives, but I don’t think they are any good.”

As is well known, thousands of people died during the Iraq war, which has left sizable parts of Iraq beholden by ethnic conflict, war, infrastructural destruction, and the rise of ISIS. Whilst Tony Blair has been branded as a war criminal by many members of the public, he has generally been protected from the law and public accountability. As mentioned, although Blair was an articulate speaker, he ushered in a new political era characterised by spin, deceit, and often baseless rhetoric about not stopping the forces of globalization. Whilst Pete and Emma identify this disingenuousness as shifting them away from the party, such a shift is not representative of a fidelity to the Liberal Democrat’s or Conservative Party’s core ideals; rather, it is brought by a sense of political abandonment. While some have suggested that Blair is recalled fondly in post-industrial areas[[2]](#endnote-2), participants in this study believed he tarnished the party, in part through the Iraq War. Jimmy (retired) claims:

“I didn’t like Tony Blair. The Iraq war was illegal, lots of people killed for nothing and it didn’t do any good. They are still fighting in the Middle East, it is worst now. He changed the party to New Labour. I can remember Harold Wilson and Callaghan, they were proper Labour. Their values were different.”

Although James Callaghan solidified the end of the post-war settlement by suggesting it could not go on indefinitely, turning to the IMF for a financial loan, the era of New Labour was regarded as embodying a decisive break with the party’s history. Blair shed the party’s skin by shifting it away from governmental commitments to full employment, collective action, and the public ownership of core services. Blair believed that capitalism’s free markets alongside a welfare safety net would ameliorate the worst effects of social inequality, while ensuring economic growth in a social world he deemed as too mobile and meritocratic for the post-war era’s class antagonisms to matter anymore[[3]](#endnote-3). He believed that social inequalities should be addressed through policy measures, rather than identifying the depth structures of neoliberal ideology and political economy as the core issues at stake. This allowed the market to operate unhinged from the state; economic inequality intensified, and the post-war period’s regulatory straitjacket was further eroded. Archie, a lifelong Labour voter, noted how: “A lot of their policies were Toryish.” Within this context, working class people’s internal defence mechanism at work – trade unions – withered, while the left-liberal, cosmopolitan bubble that represented Blair’s championing of the free market and competitive individualism thrived. Although support from traditional Labour voters like Emma, Pete and Jimmy declined in areas like Steel Town, Blair’s approach appealed to many voters, particularly further up the social structure, as he won three general elections.

The restructuring of the Labour Party under Tony Blair and then Gordon Brown meant that discussion of politicians blended into a general dissatisfaction with the political class. The idea that no matter who you voted for - nothing changed - was prevalent, and, indeed, time and time again, the terms “they are all the same” came to the fore. Katie has always voted Labour and she offers views of the political class that were representative of the samples:

“The majority of them are arseholes, they start off saying oh I wanna make things better, but they get sucked in. Look at the state of Westminster, it is the most archaic place ever. They don’t change the bloody rules they have, you read it and think howay, we are living in the 21st century. You think come on, change with the times, but they get sucked into this little Westminster bubble and they forget what it is like to live in the real world.”

Katie expressed a deep-seated discontent about politicians, suggesting that they do not serve the people and are shielded from the reality of working-class life. Essentially, the melodrama of parliamentary democracy in the neoliberal epoch often compelled politicians to dispense with ideological worldviews and accept the depoliticization of the economy and social life. Relatedly, Tom highlights what he perceived as the archaic practices of parliamentary politics: “Ayes to the left, noes to the right, forget having all that shit.” This was regarded as a distractive tool, expunging of what actually matters to people in post-industrial Steel Town including industrial job loss, remunerative jobs, degradation of working conditions, Steel Town’s economic decline and, as we will encounter, a desire to restrict immigration and leave the EU. Most respondents suggested that politicians enact a *subjective distance* from people in places like Steel Town, serving to erode their duty to represent the people. Micky, a non-voter, elucidates how:

“All of them [politicians] are tapped, off their rocker. Their heads are in the sky or up their arse – it certainly isn’t on Earth. They just want to rise to the top. They don’t care about the country; they just want to be top dog. They come across like they want to help us, but really, they don’t give a toss. All they want is more money in their pocket and status.”

Evidently, the melodramatic world of parliamentary capitalism means little to people like Micky who persistently tries to ascertain remunerative work but is entrapped in a 10 hours per week, minimum wage job at the local social club. From Micky’s viewpoint, politicians merely view people like him as an obstacle to their own desire for self-enhancement and prestige, suggesting they utilise their privileged position as a steppingstone to the advancement of their own careers. Although capitalo-parliamentarianism[[4]](#endnote-4) emphasises the virtues of democracy, Badiou claims that politicians often do not serve the working class’s interests but themselves and capital. Most participants claimed politicians are more concerned about their own property portfolios and business interests, harnessing connections for their next career move rather than addressing material conditions in places like Steel Town. Matty, another lifelong Labour voter, said:

“I hate them all mate, they are a waste of time. When they come on television I turn it off, it makes me so frustrated and mad. How can they carry on and get paid big sums for it? It’s like when they were claiming for daft stuff, fraudulent. If people like me did that, I would be jailed! They were claiming for stuff like soup and that, and some of them would have two apartments and a flat and put it in their kid’s name. One rule for them, another one for us.”

As the data reveals, politicians were regarded as deceitful, corrupt, and unaccountable, with the 2009 expenses scandal continuing to shape these sentiments. Although they receive a sizable salary and extensive expenses, many politicians claimed for trivial items including their breakfast. Whilst several were given short prison sentences, and a handful resigned, most merely apologised. This coincided with the political consensus over the handling over the global financial crisis and the imposition of austerity measures, leading to a historic decline in living standards. As mentioned, this was felt most acutely in post-industrial places like Steel Town, while many politicians continued to enhance their wealth, as Katie shows:

“They [politicians] have conflicts of interest all over the place. When they voted on whether landlords should make sure they have places fit for people living there, the majority of Conservatives are landlords themselves! Many politicians have shares in arms companies or private firms investing in the NHS. How are they allowed to vote on that? The whole system is just corrupt.”

Capitalo parliamentarianism was regarded as providing ideological cover for MPs to enhance their personal fortunes, often by investing in private businesses then voting for laws and regulations that aid their interests. Harvey offers the idea of the ‘state finance’ or ‘state-corporate’[[5]](#endnote-5) nexus to identify the revolving door between governments and multinational corporations. This door offers politicians opportunities to meet advisors, civil servants and access to legislative power for the financial industry to get a seat around the table when writing legislation that governs their industry. Other commentators, for instance, have highlighted how over 200 MPs, mainly Conservatives, possess connections to private healthcare companies, while many Lords also have connections to private health firms[[6]](#endnote-6). Such collusion demonstrates how neoliberalism has not withdrawn the state; instead, it has co-opted the nation state to facilitate profit maximisation[[7]](#endnote-7).

Hall’s notion of special liberty is also elucidated by Katie[[8]](#endnote-8). Attached to neoliberalism’s Symbolic Order’s egotistical, competitive individualism, many politicians were perceived to have awarded themselves special liberty to rise above society’s accepted norms and rules to do what is required to enhance the self, regardless of the harms it causes in post-industrial Steel Town. Capitalism’s core forces of profit, envy, greed, and the systematic stimulation of desire for social prestige combine to sometimes produce an individual willing to ruthlessly pursue their own advancement. Indeed, the respondents’ views of politicians formed a negative belief that nothing can change. Sophie highlights how:

“I’ve voted maybe three times – usually Labour. I don’t vote very often. I just think whoever gets in – it will be the same. They used to come door knocking around here, but you don’t get that anymore. You just get the odd brochure through. I just don’t believe them anyway. Whatever they say and whatever they might do, they don’t follow it up. False promises. They just sugar-coat things. I’m not big on politics at all, if it is going to happen, *it is going to happen.*”

As mentioned, a core feature of politics under neoliberalism, particularly in post-industrial zones, has been a rise in non-voting[[9]](#endnote-9). This increased in the New Labour era as around 4-5 million working class voters stopped voting. Whilst this may be regarded by many as political indifference, it is generated by a non-belief; no fundamental political economic restructuring is possible. History has stopped; all that remains is an acceptance of neoliberalism’s industrial retrenchment and a decaying political arena that is unable to inspire belief in a better world. Although Sophie has mainly not voted, the few times she has voted means her engagement with politics is temporary and fleeting, often embodying an *interpassive act* – once her vote has been enacted, she need not do anything else other than wait for the elected politicians to act on her behalf; no political campaigning or protesting because she did her part. Such interpassivity, as we will see, potentially forms a useful ideological function for neoliberal capitalism, enabling capital to cement the redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy while Steel Town’s residents passively accept the locale’s degeneration.

The interpassivity of Sophie also demonstrates how capitalist realism has been soaked onto her psyche. The idea that an alternative world can be created has diminished, the collapse of industrial work; ascent of insecure employment and the absence of a political voice are just how things are today. Throughout its history capitalism has displayed a breath-taking ability to change to survive, though today it has entered a historically unique constitution – invisibility. Observe how Sophie suggests structural change is disconnected from society’s depth structures – neoliberal ideology and politico economy. The New Labour era was a crucial phase in the development of capitalist realism, since they consolidated the system as life’s core background force and thereby adhered to many of Thatcher’s ideals, cementing market forces in areas of life that were previously untouched like the health service and education. Such a political environment fosters a widespread attitude of negativity in places like Steel Town. Fisher outlines how capitalist realism operates as a structural feeling that:

“It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Other systems might be preferable to capitalism, but capitalism is the only one that is realistic. Or it can be seen as an attitude of resignation and fatalism in the face of this – a sense that all we can do is accommodate ourselves to the dominance of capitalism and limit our hopes to contain its worst excesses”[[10]](#endnote-10).

This generates a sense that there is no point in engaging with politics, because no matter what politicians are elected the same debilitating trends continue. Ellie elucidates how:

“I have never voted, and I don’t intend to – unless something really sways me. My nanna would slaughter me for it, she used to say women fought for your rights, and that was obviously good. I don’t take any of it in, when they [politicians] come on TV I don’t listen. They promise this, promise that, then they get the votes and elected and totally change. *Nothing ever happens.* So, I just think – what am I actually voting for?”

Whilst Ellie is relatively disengaged from politics, it is important to note that her discontent is not fixed but pliable and thus can be harnessed under a new political project. Aspects of social democracy’s Symbolic Order are also present, that is, the emphasis placed upon political engagement after laissez faire capitalism’s social inequalities and the battle for female suffrage. Also note the psychic distance Ellie adopts towards politicians on TV; there is little point engaging in the political spectacle under a world governed by the narrow confines of capitalist realism. In many ways, the election of Jeremy Corbyn in 2015 as the Labour Party leader was heralded as an opportunity to reconnect with the working class in areas like Steel Town. While Corbyn committed the party to nationalising key industries, increasing the minimum wage, and abolishing tuition fees, Corbyn stayed liberal on the cultural field and emphasised the positive aspects of immigration, open borders and appeared to find it difficult to praise the monarchy and the British army. Indeed, only four participants suggested they were a fan of Corbyn, the others claimed they disliked him or were reserved. While Julia noted how, “To be honest the way I feel about them all now, if there was a general election, I just don’t think I would bother voting. I am just so sick of them,” while Alice said:

“Jeremy Corbyn [laughs]. One of the first things he did that meant I haven’t had any interest since was refusing to acknowledge the monarchy. That was it for me. You cannot represent this country and the people if you cannot show respect, it is essential. He is weak, completely weak. I wouldn’t trust him with anything. Honestly, I think he is so inadequate he just has to court younger people. It’s pathetic. The problem is all of them [politicians]. Nobody listens to us and we have nobody to trust.”

Alice’s sentiments embody the cultural divide between what Goodhart casts as the somewhere and the anywhere[[11]](#endnote-11). Whilst the participants were rooted to place, valued tradition and took pride in the country’s flag, since it symbolised their biography including the place they grew up, went to school and ascertained work, generating fond memories of Steel Town’s industrial past, Corbyn was regarded as an anywhere – cosmopolitan, globalist and liberal who views the nation’s flag as regressive. These culturally liberal tendencies were regarded as viewing the working class’s small c conservatism and pride in England’s industrial history, civil ties, tradition, and the English flag as regressive[[12]](#endnote-12). Alice’s opinion that Corbyn did not possess the leadership characteristics to be effective, and lead the country under challenging circumstances, was prevalent. Many believed he is a political activist and backbench MP, rather than possessing the potential to be the leader of the country’s core opposition party. Interestingly, Corbyn’s focus on young people, particularly through abolishing tuition fees, was cast as the embodiment of today’s politicians, using the citizenry to advance their own interests. Such a failure to relinquish their non-belief was thus tied to political fatalism and scepticism; only more broken promises would await if Corbyn was elected as prime minister. Perhaps therefore it was tethered to the Labour Party’s consolidation of neoliberal capitalism, as Jimmy outlines:

“I used to vote Labour, but the area has just got worse. The council doesn’t do much, so I vote Conservative. Not because I have money, I don’t. I don’t dislike Corbyn. It’s just, I feel *betrayed.”*

As the data reveals, the Labour Party were perceived to have failed the working class in places like Steel Town. Although the locale and broader Teesside region had mainly elected a Labour MP since the mid twentieth century, structural trends like industrial retrenchment, the absence of stability and security, bouts of joblessness to insecure employment, degrading working conditions, the loss of community and the slow-motion transformation of a once vibrant locality into a *ghost town* continued regardless of who held political power. The evidence documented in the data chapters so far meant neoliberal ideology’s core tropes of opportunity, meritocracy and individual success had entered a process regarded as ‘deaptation’[[13]](#endnote-13), whereby a once functional and coherent ideology is applied in structural conditions where it is no longer operative; neoliberalism was no longer able to absorb the participants into its master narrative. This meant many respondents began to search for an alternative - something to disrupt the status quo, which manifested in the 2016 Brexit vote.

**Brexit**

Debates on the European Union and calls for a referendum intensified with the rise and popularity of Nigel Farage and his former party UKIP’s victory in the 2014 European Parliament election[[14]](#endnote-14). Although many participants dismissed UKIP, suggesting they possessed some “bizarre” candidates who often espoused overt racist sentiments, most admired Farage, praising what they regarded as his honesty and straight-talking political style. In their view, he was not afraid to tell established politicians and the citizenry what he believed, particularly on immigration and the EU, and this was something that they welcomed. UKIP’s emphasis upon curtailing immigration, regaining political control over domestic affairs, and thus leaving the EU was popular with many participants who supported them, with the party finishing third in Steel Town at the 2015 general election. As mentioned, the town also overwhelmingly voted to Leave the EU in 2016 as the Leave campaign’s central message of ‘take back control’ resonated with many working-class people who felt politically powerless and abandoned. Whilst it failed to inspire some respondents like Chloe who, “Didn’t give it a second thought,” 14 participants elected to Leave. Many rooted this decision in a desire for an alternative politico economy to neoliberal capitalism such as Roger, 52:

“I’ve always voted between Labour and the Conservatives, but I aren’t happy with them and I voted for Brexit. Before the EU came about, the country was quite good. When we went into the EU we seem to have gone downhill; losing the steel; the good shops. People are fed up.”

Such sentiments elucidate how the Labour Party’s consensus with the Conservatives since the 2000s, that is, neoliberalism is the only viable form of political economy, enabled Brexit to harness support in post-industrial Steel Town. With politics therefore reduced to what Pabst brands as the ‘tyranny of small choices’[[15]](#endnote-15) under neoliberalism, observe how leaving the EU was regarded as puncturing the established orthodoxy and averting the area’s socio-economic decline. Some scholars have suggested this embodies a desire to return to the imperial project and the racial dominance of whites[[16]](#endnote-16), though this was absent from the respondent’s narratives, it was principally about resurrecting Steel Town’s industrial might and popularity as a seaside resort in the post-war age. With the UK’s membership of the EU coinciding with the breakdown of the post-war industrial age and neoliberalism’s ascent, it was regarded by many as a contributing factor to Steel Town’s slow-motion decline. Kev, a lifelong Labour voter, was the most articulate of the respondents. He said:

“Brexit will be looked back upon as the biggest shock across the world, the day people stood up and said we’ve had enough. They thought they could force the narrative through the media, but something happened in 2016. Anybody who votes for Brexit is a Nazi, a racist. It is pathetic, childish; grow up and get a grip. It seems to be calming down a little bit. 2016 was a pivotal year for humanity, we were the opening gambit on the changing of the world order. We just said no fucking more, no status quo, something different. I was sick of the status quo, constantly at war, constantly in austerity. This is what people forget pre-Brexit, they think it was all amazing, sweet and light. People don’t realise how important Brexit is, it was us saying fuck the establishment.”

For Kev, Emma and others, accusations that Brexit was all about racism are, “Totally wrong.” While some Brexit voters espouse racist sentiments and do not shy away from that, slandering all Leave voters as mere racists is reductionist and forms a discursive mechanism to stymie debate on important and complex issues[[17]](#endnote-17). Such a narrative fails to explore the impact of neoliberalism’s totality upon post-industrial places like Steel Town; instead, it individualises a structural issue and ensures that the system continues as life’s core background force. Covering up the absence of stability and security in Steel Town, it fails to reveal the nuanced driving forces behind Brexit in this research study. Nonetheless, observe how Kev suggests his vote to Leave embodied a rejection of the status quo – deindustrialisation, insecure and uncertain employment, war, and austerity measures, which he believes has been neglected by many liberal commentators.

Discussions surrounding Brexit also explored the European Union. As England has been identified as one of the most Eurosceptic nations[[18]](#endnote-18), somewhat inevitably, not one respondent had anything positive to say about the EU; instead, it was regarded as undemocratic and unaccountable. Pete voted to Leave. He claims:

“At least in this country, we vote for a party and we can turn around and say well it hasn’t gone well - I voted for them. When we have unelected officials, who put these people in power? I didn’t. The EU is a hierarchy of their own, who are they to tell us what we can and can’t do? If we don’t like them, we can get onto them. If MPs don’t toe the line, we should sack them. This lot in Europe, no, get the cunts out. It is like handing the keys over for your house.”

Being a member of the EU was perceived to hollow out the nation’s democratic process, shifting further power and control away from Steel Town’s residents and awarding it to an undemocratic elite in Brussels. From Pete’s viewpoint, capitalo parliamentarianism is supposed to be a vehicle that channels peoples’ dissatisfaction, but the EU insulates itself from democratic debate and the will of its member state’s populaces. Intensifying the respondents’ feelings of political powerlessness under neoliberalism, the EU further eroded the ability of politics to yield positive change and protect Steel Town from market forces. Essentially, EU membership exacerbated the sense that they had been politically abandoned under neoliberalism[[19]](#endnote-19).

Considering this, the idea that the EU is a progressive institution was often met with bewilderment, intensifying the disconnect between the political class and people in places like Steel Town. Emma voted to Leave. She believes membership of the EU is:

“Just crackers. We don’t vote on European laws – how can it be a democracy? These people in power should be voted for, they can’t just be given jobs unaccountably. I am sick of hearing about it [Brexit].”

Some scholars believe the EU is undemocratic and, in part, has secured its hegemon through shielding itself from the demands of its member states[[20]](#endnote-20). For example, the EU’s most powerful bodies which shape its policy agenda like the European Commission, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB) are not elected. Therefore, they are not accountable to nobody; cannot be unseated in democratic elections and possess the power to influence the domestic policies of its 27-member states, especially the 19 members that have adopted the Euro. Changing the policies of the EU requires the approval of the European council and agreement of over half of its member states, a process Tuck has outlined:

“The European Council has to agree to put any proposed amendment to a special convention ‘composed of representatives of national Parliaments, of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States, of the European Parliament and of the Commission’, which has to ‘adopt by consensus a recommendation to a conference of representatives of the governments of the Member States’, each of which has then separately to ratify the proposed amendment before it can come into force. If there are any hold-outs, ‘the matter shall be referred to the European Council.[[21]](#endnote-21)”

Perhaps therefore the EU’s institutional arrangements protects it from demands for structural change and erodes the EU’s member states policy freedom. Zizek believes this ‘democratic deficit’ was a necessary, inbuilt part of the structure’[[22]](#endnote-22) to consolidate capital’s economic interests like the freedom of movement across borders to be able to exploit multiple nation’s labour force. As such, it could be argued that the stay and reform argument that was espoused by many commentators and Labour Party politicians before and after the referendum covers up how it was constructed to protect itself from citizenry’s demands[[23]](#endnote-23). While the prominent academic Yanis Varoufakis and activist Paul Mason persistently emphasised this idea, they never offered a coherent strategy on how to put it into action. Relatedly, Katie suggests:

“The EU is an unelected group of bullies. What they did to Greece where they blackmailed them, that for me was the final straw. If you’ve got a group of people who can do that to a country who are on the bones of their arses, then I don’t want anything to do with them.”

Indeed, the EU is not politically neutral but operates to enforce capital’s interests. Embodied in the European Single Market is the four freedoms: freedom of movement for labour, capital, services, and commodities. Although labour is free to move across the EU’s member states, labour cannot move so freely but rather inhabits the hollowed-out husks of locales like Steel Town. Such an arrangement adheres to capital’s interests, as controls over capital’s movements cannot be enforced domestically, Steel Town’s Longue durée of industrial work can be eroded as industrial plants are moved abroad, while labour market conditions can be degraded to maximise profitability. Also observe how Katie mentions that the EU sided with capital over employees in relation to the Greek crisis which started during the 2008 global financial crash. After lengthy debates between Greece and the EU, culminating in the extraordinary rise and fall of SYRIZA, the Greek government agreed to several conditional financial loans. Greece would be awarded the loans on the condition that it implemented more marketisation, austerity measures, privatisation of state utilities and the erosion of working conditions. This has intensified joblessness, impoverishment, and homelessness, as well as poor economic growth[[24]](#endnote-24). Perhaps the EU therefore depoliticised a crisis generated by neoliberalism and imposed more neoliberal mechanisms to maximise profit for capital. Illuminating the sense that the EU is undemocratic, and that Brexit is partially a vote for sovereignty, is Alice:

“We are ruled by Europe. We want our autonomy and sovereignty back. To call our own shots and do what we want. The establishment assume we are ill-educated and aren’t worried about the future. It’s like a lot of young people at the moment, saying when we get to 65, we shouldn’t vote, unbelievable. Older people have *life experience*. I don’t vote for myself; I vote for the future – for my kids and grandkids. We need to be strong on our own.”

Expressing a desire to give primacy to Steel Town’s and England’s interests, Alice elucidates how Brexit is attached to Teesside’s industrial decline. As the region has endured industrial retrenchment, and the current labour market contains an absence of social stability and economic security, Brexit is regarded as generating more domestic policy freedom to pursue an alternative politico economy. Perhaps such feelings are also linked to the EU’s depoliticization of the economy, whereby it is protected from democratic demands and imposes neoliberal ideology[[25]](#endnote-25). In consequence, Brexit is cast by Alice and others as a unique opportunity to renew the democratic process and for the nation state to protect working class people against the market’s tendency to generate social distress.

Importantly, Alice also displays awareness of how Leave voters have been dismissed by many commentators and politicians as intellectually deficient and unaware of their economic interests. However, the nuanced sentiments above demonstrate how this is reductionist, covering up the reality of life in places like Steel Town. As mentioned, neoliberalism had eroded the ability to plan for and imagine the future; the respondents felt a sense of entrapment, unable to psychically project something different. Therefore, it could be argued that the respondents’ Brexit vote was generated by an urge to imagine a more positive future, partially driven by feelings of *what once existed*. The older respondents and Alice had witnessed a different world – ICI, the steelworks, parallel and stable biographies, a degree of commonality and community. The Brexit vote was thus an attempt to preserve what little of value remained and hope that elements of the past could be resurrected.

Alice also draws attention to the ‘illiberal core’[[26]](#endnote-26) of liberal leftists today. Whilst it is surely incumbent upon inquisitive individuals to understand the profound political changes brought about in recent years with the shift to nationalism, many liberals have suggested nationalist voters’ democratic participation should be nullified. Although they espouse liberal ideals of respect, difference and tolerance, there is an increasing discrepancy between their ideology and reality. Utilised as another tool to suppress open debate, it covers up how there are potential parallels between young people and older individuals’ views on society and politics in deindustrialised locales. Rob, 18, notes how:

“I would have voted Leave. We were too tied up in lots of stuff, it would be better if we were independent. It is a working-class area here, there isn’t that much money around. It is working class people, living on a budget. Voting Leave would hopefully make us an individual country who don’t have to funnel money out of the country and focus on ourselves to make us better.”

Whilst Micky was not old enough to vote in the EU referendum, he claims:

“We need more jobs, make our country better. I don’t know what it is now [the country]. If we could stay in and have enough money to give people for jobs and apprenticeships, I wouldn’t vote to Leave. But because of the financial state of the country, I think we should.”

Views above outline how the desire for sovereignty and democratic renewal is engendered by capitalo parliamentarianism’s inability to protect Steel Town’s residents and their desire to retain remunerative employment. Both Rob and Micky cannot accrue secure employment, they thus hope Brexit will engender more localised opportunities to forge a stable livelihood. Evidently, both the older and younger participants cast Brexit in similar terms, desiring that the state give primacy to their interests particularly through improving the local economy in Steel Town.

It could be argued that there is a contradiction in the sentiments above, since many participants grounded their Brexit vote in a discontent with the liberal establishment, yet they outlined a revitalised feeling of trust in the same order to generate significant political economic change. Nonetheless, it could be argued that for some respondents Brexit hinged upon both belief and disbelief. Utilising Kotze’s theorisation of degrees of assimilation into liberalism’s ‘dream myth’ of incremental progress and optimism about the present and the future, some Leave voters were partially assimilated and far enough removed from capitalism’s Real to vote for Brexit. Therefore, they adopted the psychosocial mechanism of fetishistic disavowal; they knew that Brexit may not change anything, but they engaged in it anyway in the partial hope that it would. Although none of the respondents were fully assimilated, it could be argued that several of the non-voters like Chloe were not assimilated; rather, they were entrapped at the bottom of the social hierarchy and were not far removed enough from capitalism’s Real to suspend their disbelief in politicians and the system’s ability to deliver change.

Some commentators have pointed out that many neoliberal political thinktanks suggested that England would be home to a social and economic dystopia post-Brexit[[27]](#endnote-27). Many economists and institutions like the G20 persistently warned about the potential consequences of leaving the EU. This narrative was prevalent throughout the referendum campaigns, with most of the political establishment claiming Brexit would have an adverse impact upon the nation’s economy. Evidence outlined above claims such an idea fell on deaf ears in post-industrial locales like Steel Town because the dystopia did not await on the horizon; rather, for some they had been living through it for many years. Steel Town was once home to relatively remunerative and secure industrial work. This awarded many people like Alice, Matty, Mary, Jimmy and others feelings of social accomplishment and pride, with the older aged respondents believing that their children would follow in their footsteps and obtain a reasonably decent standard of living. A functioning community was harnessed, with many respondents recalling an epoch where people knew and spent time with their neighbours.

Shifting to neoliberalism, though, meant that these valued aspects of Steel Town’s civic life were dismantled. A relatively prosperous locality was now branded as a dead place or a ghost town. The relatively recent closure of the steelworks heralded the end of Teesside’s industrial might. Many people now worked under hyper exploitative working conditions, containing an absence of stability and security. The sense of positivity previously attached to some of their working identities was absent, while the youngest individuals like Micky, Olly and Rob felt cut adrift from the social, unable to acquire remunerative employment and construct a coherent livelihood. Within this context, the future was absent. When your loved one has lost a remunerative job at the local steelworks, when you do not earn more than the minimum wage, or when you see no future for your children or grandchildren, how can it possibly get much worse? Emma illuminates this with regards to the absence of industrial labour’s job for life:

“Definitely not, not anymore. Way back, yeah. My dad used to work at ICI, my husband’s dad worked at British Steel, in their day it was and they retired comfortably. But certainly not anymore, not anywhere now. It is a shame, but that is just the way of the world, yet they keep going on about Brexit being bad for the economic climate and all this.”

Such a dystopic narrative, therefore, did not resonate in post-industrial zones like Steel Town because those in economically precarious situations had more to gain from voting for Brexit; at least a chance to avert the slow-motion socio-economic decline of the neoliberal era. Emphasising the importance of the deindustrialisation process and current labour market conditions, though, does not preclude cultural issues. In fact, they are intimately connected to one another.

**Immigration**

As mentioned, discontent with net migration figures has been a core component of the rise of English nationalism, which reached a peak in 2015 at 331,000[[28]](#endnote-28). Although most respondents were reserved about immigration and wanted to somewhat curtail it, it was a nuanced dissatisfaction that was tethered to Steel Town’s death under neoliberalism. Discontent with immigration was often conflated with asylum seekers and refugees. Most were sympathetic towards all these groups, suggesting they would also migrate given the structural deficiencies in Eastern Europe like poor wages, and the Middle East’s such as war and terrorism. However, there was a recurring sentiment that immigrants were favoured by the state over Steel Town’s economic needs. At the same time, immigrants were cast as an economic competitor for jobs and housing in an era of myriad competition. Micky outlines how:

“We are human, we should treat everyone fairly, but I don’t agree with loads of people coming over here. Okay, they are trying to provide for their family, but we can’t even give enough money to British people. So, in that sense because we don’t have enough money, we shouldn’t be giving it to people from different countries. They aren’t ‘stealing our jobs’ as such, but it doesn’t help with money and housing. We have enough problems in this country. If the financial state was different, then I would like to think we could let more in – but how is it right to help them when we can’t help ourselves?”

Although Micky sympathises with immigrants, he is not happy with net migration figures, believing they intensify competition in the labour market. Despite adhering to neoliberalism’s *sacred promise* that hard work will eventually equate to success by enduring college, an unfair dismissal from a mechanical apprenticeship and a reduction in his hours at the social club, he has not attained social stability and economic security. While he problematises the somewhat crude notion that migrants ‘steal jobs’, he believes it is obvious that they amplify competition for economically insecure employment at the bottom of the labour market. With migrants tending to work at the lower ends of the labour force[[29]](#endnote-29), the core political narrative from the liberal left that migrants are an overwhelming positive for society and the economy fails to resonate with Micky’s own economic position. Although it is difficult to analyse the impact of immigration on both wages and working conditions, in part because of the different factors that need to be considered like the skills of migrants and current employees, some evidence indicates that in some poorly paid labour markets, migrants put downward pressure on wages and intensify the difficulties that poor skilled UK born employees endure in ascertaining work[[30]](#endnote-30). We met Tom in the previous chapter. He voted Leave and believed that:

“If we didn’t have any homeless British people, who are using foodbanks, if we were economically really, really good, then we can take more people. At Christmas, I walked through Steel Town’s high-street and even the people selling Big Issue are Eastern Europeans. I’m not being racist, it is almost like our homeless people aren’t good enough to sell Big Issue. To me, it just speaks volumes about what is going on – our own people aren’t good enough.”

Whilst the working class were once at the forefront of the industrial age, helping to build significant global landmarks and acquiring feelings of social usefulness and value, most respondents believed that they were now regarded as obsolete and confined to the historical dustbin. Simultaneously, though, they suggested migrants were favoured, championed by politicians, and even given the low-paid jobs over the native working class. However, as Milkman notes, the dissatisfaction towards migrants in deindustrialised areas is misplaced; it needs to be directed towards capital[[31]](#endnote-31). Immigrants are not to blame for Steel Town’s historic restructuring from a productive economy to services, though people like Tom search for somebody to blame in the absence of a universal political narrative that could locate the true cause of the area’s plight. In many ways, Tom’s livelihood is shaped by the same structural forces as immigrants, not least the need to sell his labour power, though neoliberalism’s Symbolic Order and its primacy to individualism and social status means he negates identifying migrants as a group that could form a collective struggle against capital. Instead, they are a competitor and thus somebody to outdo under intensely competitive social conditions.

As scholars have outlined, suggesting migrants are a fundamental problem and cause of a post-industrial locale’s degeneration is attached to the Labour Party’s failure to challenge neoliberalism and its futility in directing the working class towards the core enemy – capital[[32]](#endnote-32). As mentioned, the New Labour era consolidated neoliberalism, failing to challenge marketisation, privatisation and myriad inequality. The post-war industrial age’s structural tools that enabled working class people to ground their problems within structural conditions, not least trade unions, working men’s social clubs, the shopfloor camaraderie of industrial work and a sense of community are now absent. The disappearance of these mechanisms perhaps forms a ‘process of consciousness-deflation’[[33]](#endnote-33), whereby some working class people misidentify the cause of deindustrialised locales decline. Perhaps Tom’s views are thus a misdirected economic antagonism expressed in a cultural guise, working to conceal the role of the depth structures - neoliberal political economy and ideology – in shaping English nationalism.

Like the other respondents, Tom also acknowledges how many working-class people who espouse nationalistic views have been dismissed as idiots and racists. However, the sentiments evidenced are tied to neoliberalism’s structural reconfiguration of Steel Town and Teesside, meaning the liberal left’s emphasis on pathologizing English nationalism essentially transforms class issues of economic inequality into cultural intolerance, prejudice, and bigotry[[34]](#endnote-34). These hollowed out platitudes resonate little with those that occupy the deindustrialised zones, since they fail to illuminate the reality of life in these areas. The liberal left also fails to acknowledge the nuance surrounding working class views on immigration, with many expressing both empathy and protectionist attitudes, as Leave voter Jess outlines:

“We’ve just had a family arrive at our school, Iraqis, they are lovely, but they can’t speak English. Straight away, the eldest boy has got support from an assistant, one to one, been given a house - fair enough. But looking at our school and cuts to education money, schools are struggling. So, we have to find that money as a school for that child who has come over here. I just think you’ve been accepted in the country, you have a safe place now, which is really good, but why should our school then have to pay for that when we are losing teachers and teaching assistants? I think it’s great they have a safe haven, and the upheaval of moving here must be terrible - I’m not disputing that. But they are given that support straight away. If it was your child who is struggling, you wouldn’t be given that support. We have a little boy with brain damage, he isn’t bad enough to go to special school, but the government only gives us two hours of support a day.”

In Jess’s view, refugees’ inability to speak English intensifies her discontent. Evidently, she and others are not anti-migration per se, but Jess believes refugees/immigrants’ needs are prioritised over native citizens. While she is sympathetic towards their plight, she believes that the needs of the native English working class should be given primacy. Placed in this context, the idea that immigration does not exacerbate competition for resources in relatively deprived areas falls on deaf ears, since more migrants at local schools magnifies the dearth of educational facilities and time available to address Steel Town’s disadvantaged children’s needs. Whilst Archie was out of the country during the 2016 referendum, he would have voted to Leave. He expressed similar views to Jess:

“I think this country lets far too many migrants in. Some of them have had terrible lives mind. My mate used to deliver in Middlesbrough, where the houses have just been rebuilt, people used to smash their windows and write slogans on the walls. He said some of them people haven’t done anything wrong. They were working like slaves, doing jobs our young’uns wouldn’t get out of bed for. But there should be a cap. *Look around* - we have food banks, we can’t feed and look after our own, never mind letting more people in.”

Observe how Archie suggests this discontent recently erupted in nearby Middlesbrough, a locale of permanent recession defined by industrial retrenchment, the absence of security and cultural outlooks of despondency and nihilism. Sometimes this can erupt in blind rage, whereby apolitical and inarticulate anger is directed towards vulnerable social groups who are not responsible for the area’s decline. Inarticulate discontent appears to emerge in the absence of a universal political narrative that locates the true cause of working-class people’s plight – capital[[35]](#endnote-35). The Labour Party’s naturalisation of society’s depth structures ensures that blind rage will continue to occasionally manifest in these post-industrial zones.

Archie also highlights the EU’s freedom of movement for labour. Many claim this enables employers to carefully choose their employees, serving to diminish solidarity amongst workforces[[36]](#endnote-36). Others claim it depopulates some Eastern European nations; for example, Bulgaria has lost a third of its doctors to Western EU states whereby wages and working conditions are better[[37]](#endnote-37). Whilst Archie claims many young people will not undertake degrading employment, it tends to mask the structural exploitation many of them endure such as Micky, Olly, Rob and Emma’s son who all continue to work hard despite working in poorly-paid jobs. Although there was a widespread sense that migrants intensified competition for jobs, most of the sample claimed they were wary of voicing their views because they would be cast as racist. Kev enumerated on how:

“Immigration is an emotive one, a tricky one. The Left jump all over you, you are not even allowed to question. The EU globalist dream is one of open borders. For me, that’s a nightmare cause we would be forced out of our homes in rampaging hordes because they think this is where the money is. If they are seeking asylum, of course, why wouldn’t ya? The problem we have with this immigration is slavery. You look at the boats of black lads, they have probably paid somebody to come over here, the ships that are zipping about the Mediterranean is just slavery - sex slavery, sex trafficking.”

Some of the liberal left have suggested that today’s nationalism embodies the rise of a creeping authoritarianism[[38]](#endnote-38), though others claim it is the liberal left that desire to be the commanding authority[[39]](#endnote-39). Slandering concerns with current immigration levels as racist, many liberals stifle debate and thereby deny alternative formulations of how society could be organised. This is a reactionary form of politics, ensuring the debate about emotive issues like immigration remains rooted within culture rather than neoliberal political economy. Peoples’ complex life experiences in areas like Steel Town are dismissed, forestalling political intervention, and thereby aiding neoliberalism’s ideological dominance. Perhaps the reproduction of society’s underlying politico economic configuration and the dismissal of working-class concerns exposes the close ideological link between the liberal left and neoliberals[[40]](#endnote-40).

Observe how Kev also highlights how criminal actors in the Global South have taken advantage of capitalism’s crises in the Middle East, since they have compelled vulnerable people to pay extortionate fees to cross the Mediterranean where thousands have tragically died[[41]](#endnote-41). While some make it across the continent and survive, they are often compelled to undertake menial and illegal forms of work where they are deprived of basic rights and the nation’s minimum wage[[42]](#endnote-42). The EU have failed to adequately ameliorate this problem, instead emphasising the importance of humanitarianism. As previously documented, exemplifying this were Angela Merkel’s suggestions for open borders, which was an idea that was anathema to many respondents including Tom:

“You cannot just disperse millions of people throughout the world, and everything be okay. You need to look at the root cause, why doesn’t somebody stop the war in the Middle East? Then people wouldn’t have to be dispersed – go back and rebuild. Look, we need to do our bit, but not to the detriment of our own. If people are coming from Syria and get priority, that is wrong. Put us first, our economic issues. People will say where are they going to go? I don’t know, and it’s bad saying that, but economically we aren’t in a good position.”

Zalloua claims the dominant debate about the refugee crisis plays out between the nationalist right and the liberal left. Whilst the former desires to restrict the flow of refugees entering Western nations, the latter embody ‘Beautiful Souls’[[43]](#endnote-43), calling for open borders and good ethics and morals. This could be identified as a hollowed-out demand since they know open borders will never happen as it would intensify anger and discontent. Indeed, focussing solely on helping refugees ‘is a pharmakon; it is both cure and poison’[[44]](#endnote-44) since it fails to address what Tom believes are the underlying issues, not least restructuring society so that the mass movement of vulnerable people is not a structural inevitability. By depoliticising a political economic crisis, today’s liberal left fails to identify neoliberal capitalism as the fundamental issue at stake, evaporating the historic class struggle in favour of politically safe ideas like moralism, sympathy, and empathy. According to Slavoj Zizek, this concealment of the politico economy ensures that capitalism generates structural crises often free from critique[[45]](#endnote-45).

Observe how Tom identifies that it is the socioeconomic totality exposed in the previous chapters – namely, deindustrialisation, the absence of well-paid work, underemployment, degrading working conditions and the death of Steel Town’s town centre – that generates reservations about accepting refugees. This need to posit cultural concerns within broader events and processes was identified by Katie:

“At the end of the day, if we are bombing the shit out of countries, we should be expected to take some people on, but why don’t they stop at the first country they come across?”

According to some scholars, the West’s, particularly the UK and USA’s intervention in the Middle East ensured Iraq is a compliant state through opening their oil reserves to international markets, though this destroyed the country’s infrastructure, generated countless deaths and displaced many others[[46]](#endnote-46). Therefore, for Katie it should not be unreasonable for some Western states to accommodate victims of the profit motive, though she ponders over why they do not stay in neighbouring states. Some suggest that refugees aim for Scandinavia and the UK because of their relatively good welfare states, better paid employment opportunities and consumer culture’s spectacle of hedonistic enjoyment and material prosperity[[47]](#endnote-47). Alice, though, continues the story:

“What I am not happy with is them claiming asylum then coming through different countries and making their way over to the UK. It is outrageous. If you are looking for a safe haven, find one and stay there. They come over here because they are prioritised over our own people who need looking after. I’m not happy with it. The people working in our hospitals from all over the world – consultants, surgeons, doctors, nobody is objecting to that. We need them, and it is helpful. But illegals, I don’t agree with that.”

Rob agrees:

“If they have something to offer, then fine. But people who are coming here illegally, fleeing and jumping on lorries and sneaking in, like, I don’t agree with that.”

Rightly or wrongly, asylum seekers were perceived to favour the UK because they are treated favourably by the government. For the participants, important local issues like Teesside’s industrial emaciation and the decline of the local area were neglected, while more and more resources and governmental attention was directed towards asylum seekers. Evidently, skilled individuals are desirable while those who have little to contribute to the economy are undesirable. Some have problematised the well-trodden idea that the UK government prioritises immigrants and refugees over the native working class, since the former tend to do jobs that are ‘dirty, dangerous and difficult’[[48]](#endnote-48) and therefore possess a shared structural experience to many participants in this study. Simultaneously, asylum seekers are principally dispersed throughout the most impoverished areas in decrepit housing. Recall how Archie claimed some asylum seekers were subjected to racist abuse in a deprived locale. Indeed, perhaps what the respondents’ discontent embodies is the reverse side of ‘*amour propre’[[49]](#endnote-49)*, whereby the elevation of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers comes at the expense of the working class, engendering political discontent.

Moreover, according to Murray, there are around one million illegal immigrants in the UK and much of the political class believe this is difficult to address because of the issue’s sensitivity and the resources that would be required. Such a large volume of illegal migrants is likely to intensify infrastructural problems, not least the demand for housing and jobs outstripping supply. Occasionally, the discontent expressed above was gendered, with Claire, a Leave voter, claiming, “It does seem to be healthy young lads that are brought over. There should be better checks.” These discussions often melded into issues associated with Islam, political correctness, and what they believed was the stifling of important debates. The next section explores multiculturalism and the perceived attack on free speech.

**Islam and political correctness**

Discontent towards Islam, occasionally expressed in a racist manner, has been a relatively recent political development[[50]](#endnote-50), with some claiming that Brexit/nationalistic views are driven by a concern over more and more people converting to Islam across the European continent[[51]](#endnote-51). Although a handful of respondents expressed reservations, most had little to say about the religion. Most claimed they did not possess much knowledge of Islam, suggesting the mainstream media offered an inaccurate picture of the religion to drive racism. Whilst these individuals often pointed to the racism of Tommy Robinson, the former leader of the far-right political activist group the English Defence League, there was sometimes a contradictory agreement with some his sentiments, as Claire unveils:

“People don’t listen to what all the idiots are saying like Tommy Robinson. Well, I am against forced marriages, and I am against female genital mutilation (FGM), I think it is ridiculous. If it is a tradition, then it is ridiculous. But I don’t know much about Islam, their beliefs and that, I can’t give a proper opinion. They need to abide by the law of the country they are in. But because a few Muslims are terrorists it doesn’t mean all Muslims are. Hitler was German – every German isn’t a psycho.”

Although Claire suggests Robinson is a bigot, she expresses discontent with many of the historic traditions associated with Islam like forced marriages and FGM. As the liberal left do not discuss these thorny and sensitive issues, it enables racists like Robinson to harness support. Nevertheless, Claire highlights a potential paradox of liberal multiculturalism, that is, the schism between liberal tolerance and adequate integration into society. While people who voice reservations about Islam are often dismissed by the liberal left as Islamophobic and xenophobic[[52]](#endnote-52), such slandering ignores the socioeconomic totality that engenders cultural perspectives and sentiments. This was interlinked by many participants including Dave:

“There are more and more mosques, I’m not racist. We just seem to let everyone in. We can’t take anymore. *It doesn’t work for the youngsters as it is*, never mind accepting more.”

Alice suggests:

“My views on some of it [Islam] is negative. Like the Burqa and forced marriages, which are just oppressive.”

Although the locality in Teesside that the research was conducted in is overwhelmingly white, surrounding areas are much more ethnically diverse, particularly nearby Middlesbrough. Indeed, Winlow and colleagues claim that multiculturalism is a positive cultural schema that sits alongside a negative political economy[[53]](#endnote-53). Although the former offers an image of harmony, diversity, and acceptance, it has taken place in a broader climate of unprecedented economic inequality and the evisceration of once relatively thriving locales like Steel Town. Focussing solely on tolerance and acceptance serves to mask the structural backdrop exposed in this book, not least the area’s industrial emaciation, the absence of well-paid jobs, as well as the shift from relative community spirit to what might be classified as post-social tendencies. It could be argued that focussing on acceptance and tolerance while neglecting economic matters enables neoliberal capitalism to redistribute wealth from the working class to the top of the social hierarchy. Such a cultural programme therefore rings rather hollow when local people like Dave’s son cannot find remunerative work. Rather than emphasising tolerance, critical scholars claim we need more intolerance directed towards the root cause of today’s cultural antagonisms – neoliberal capitalism[[54]](#endnote-54).

Indeed, dissatisfaction about political correctness was a common sentiment in the interviews, particularly in relation to discussing sensitive political topics. Most of the participants viewed political correctness negatively, suggesting it is another political tool to stifle debate. Therefore, it was generally viewed as another way to silence peoples’ concerns in post-industrial areas like Steel Town, enabling the liberal left’s political views to dominate. Tom outlines how:

“When I watch the news these days, I think this would have just been sorted out years ago. Now it is too politically correct. The whole thing with the Islamic lass, [Shamima Begum], just sort it out. But you can’t say out because you are a racist. I think there is a lot of you can’t do this, you can’t do that. For me, that is one of the biggest things of the last few years, what you can and can’t say. It is wrong.”

Tom draws attention to what has been cast as multiculturalism’s ‘police officers of discourse’[[55]](#endnote-55) and ‘language patrollers’[[56]](#endnote-56). Expressing discontent about issues that appear to be problematic to some of the participants but whereby they do not mean to cause any offence are cast as racist, and thus Tom withdraws his views on Shamima Begum re-entering the UK and attempting to retain British citizenship after joining ISIS when she was 15. For Tom, an embargo is being placed upon various political debates, particularly around multiculturalism. This has led some commentators to suggest that trip wires have been inserted across the socio-cultural field, whereby people must be wary of what views they can express and challenge, engendering anxiety and mistrustfulness[[57]](#endnote-57). In this context, a call out culture has emerged whereby people can lose their employment and livelihoods for disagreeing with liberalism’s worldview, further eroding debate. Jess says:

“Well, you can’t say you’re English anymore, you have to say oh I’m British. I just feel as though it is a shame, we were such a fantastic thing. I sound like a patriarch, don’t I?”

Steve Hall believes that liberalism is underpinned by a politics of fear. Such fear is tethered to the early twentieth century’s social horrors, not least how the German state was utilised to mobilize the citizenry to attempt to exterminate the Jews[[58]](#endnote-58). However, the hegemony of liberalism, particularly over the last four decades, has generated political discontent expressed most evidently through Brexit and the rise of nationalism, serving to heighten the liberal left’s fear of an adjudicating authority. Therefore, the slightest discontent with immigration, Islam, or emphasising the importance of the English flag is deemed intolerable and racist, embodying ‘liberalism’s negative anywhere but that political meandering’[[59]](#endnote-59). However, a coherent and effective political programme cannot be rooted in fear since it generally accepts the present as the least worst of all ways to organise society and thus fails to adequately intervene to protect Steel Town from the vagaries of market forces. The intensification of the liberal left’s palpable sense of fear has intensified Steel Town’s post-social relations, with Kev documenting how:

“I have loads of people on the left who call me right. I’m not. The left just moved away from me. Apparently, I am a Nazi and racist, that’s what loads of them call me, white privilege and all that bollocks. I’ve been dragged up in Steel Town, ya know what I mean? What I’ve got, I’ve grafted me self. Nobody gives a fuck about this identity stuff, who cares? To be fair, it is just another globalisation tool where they just want us to be one homogenous blob. I want common interests but difference in various ways. They want to destroy culture, they’re cultural Marxists that’s what they are mate…. The Left have eaten away at themselves, people should be looking at these extremists [identitarian left] just like the right look at the EDL and say what a bunch of arseholes. You have to find the ground and things that connect us, not divide us.”

As previously documented, left liberal assertions that those who espouse nationalistic opinions are reminiscent of Nazis diminishes the early twentieth century’s social horrors, not least eugenicist beliefs, a desire for racial domination and the deaths of millions of people[[60]](#endnote-60). Since the 2016 Brexit vote, accusations from sections of the liberal left that white working class people are privileged have intensified. Indeed, such a development is one of the liberal left’s ‘negative quilting points’[[61]](#endnote-61), exacerbating the now threadbare connection between the political left and working-class people in places like Steel Town. For Kev, it makes little sense to conflate the socio-economic interests of all white people, since it covers up structural conditions. It might be useful to ask: what sense does it make to compare Kev, a white working-class man, who left his job as a post-man (on 25k annually) because of exploitative working conditions and poor relations with his managers, while his brother lost his job at the steelworks when it closed in 2015, to a white capitalist financier or white owner of a global corporation?

Therefore, white privilege covers up capitalism’s class antagonism and its social inequalities, demanding cultural recognition within unequal structures[[62]](#endnote-62). It potentially individualises social issues and turns away from the nation state as the core locus of power in generating social change and tackling inequalities/injustices, thereby maintaining the system’s core logic of profit maximisation and market expansion. Advocates of white privilege are thus not really concerned with material privilege, they just want people to have earnt it, regardless of neoliberalism’s tectonic inequalities[[63]](#endnote-63). Placing emphasis upon white privilege to combat today’s antagonisms, Zalloua believes that many liberals engage in the psychosocial act of fetishistic disavowal – they know it is not adequate in dealing with racism, though they espouse it anyway to take the moral high ground[[64]](#endnote-64).

Kev also alludes to how political correctness is potentially divisive because it dwindles the ability to come together under a shared and collective political ideal. It emphasises the need to tolerate difference, rather than focussing on what unites us. As we will discuss in the final chapter, it is an imperative for the Left to focus on Sameness. Although as Fisher outlined, emancipatory politics ‘must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable’[[65]](#endnote-65) and whilst Brexit potentially provided this historic opportunity[[66]](#endnote-66), the political Left remained attached to the status quo, espousing calls for a second referendum on EU membership.

**Second referendum**

The left liberal’s demand to not implement the Brexit vote and instead enact a second referendum continued until December 2019 with the victory of the Conservative Party and the fall of the Red Wall at the last general election. Although many polls suggest Leave voters had not changed their mind on EU membership, the Brexit Party emerged victorious at the 2019 European Elections, signifying a desire to implement Brexit. While four participants either said yes or were undecided on another referendum, the others suggested it was a betrayal of democracy. Most expressed this is an angry manner, claiming it was yet another example of the political class not listening to working class people. When asked about a second referendum, Emma replied with:

“Oh god, no. Definitely not. The decision has been made. We are a democracy, get on with it. It is a farce. We had the campaigns, people have decided, whether you like it or not. But they obviously feel as though people have *made the wrong decision*, so now they are up in arms about it. If they didn’t want us to make the wrong decision, then why give us the choice? They [politicians] are just so wrong. It annoys me – people are so fed up.”

Ultimately, the demands for another second referendum from the liberal left gave yet more evidence to the respondents’ beliefs that politicians care only for themselves, are egotistical and do not serve the working class’s interests. Awarding voters a say on European membership was cast as tolerable, though only if they voted to maintain the status quo and preserve membership of a neoliberal institution that is generally committed to enforcing capital’s economic interests across the continent[[67]](#endnote-67). The democratic process was therefore cast as a façade; a hollowed-out spectacle that offered the appearance of change, but nothing really changed. Although parliamentary democracy is cast as emblematic of political freedom and choice, some argue that it places restrictions on what is regarded as politically and economically possible[[68]](#endnote-68). Expressing a palpable sense of anger and discontent, Emma outlines how some politicians had again awarded themselves special liberty. A historic mandate to exit the EU could be ignored to preserve neoliberal capitalism. Evidently, the concerns of many working-class people and the accumulative dissatisfaction expressed through nationalistic sentiments in the shadow of capitalism’s Real were deemed unimportant. As Hall & Winlow have outlined, it is clear that the liberal left wants to be a paternal authority and educate working class people about making the morally correct political choices[[69]](#endnote-69). Alice also spoke angrily about a second referendum:

“Absolutely not. No chance – no. Because then what happens to democracy? How are you ever going to believe what they [politicians] say? What would happen in the future? Are they just going to say we can’t implement that because we don’t agree with it? You know, we can’t get around this so let’s just vote again, and go on and on? We were given the chance and information. It’s a serious thing.”

Some scholars have argued that capitalism’s relationship with democracy is inconclusive[[70]](#endnote-70). Capitalo parliamentarism functions by eliciting the appearance of political debate and freedom, now focusing extensively on micro issues around identity, diversity, and the characteristics of politicians, while macro political economic questions about how to organise society are absent from politics. In this climate, capitalo parliamentarism is faced with a prolonged antagonism, that is, class tensions and managing the socio-economic interests of capital vs working class people. Streeck believes that most politicians under neoliberalism signed up to its economic logic of giving primacy to the market, and therefore the democratic process has been eroded, though it continues to function by generating an illusion that people can bring about fundamental change if only they vote for the correct party. Observe how Alice believes capitalo parliamentarism can be a structural obstacle, forestalling change that disrupts the liberal consensus. Indeed, Claire outlines how it perhaps favours certain ideological views:

“If Remain had won and there was talk of a second referendum, they would have a meltdown. There was a vote, the people voted. There was a decision, and that is it! You shouldn’t have a second referendum or another one until they get the decision they want. I think it is wrong – not because I voted Leave, but if Remain had won and we were going on about a second referendum, there would be hell on.”

Dave [non-voter] agrees:

“Whether it is right or wrong, we voted out – you’ve got to act on that.”

For Claire, the liberal left’s political core is characterised by hypocrisy, not least because if the nation had voted to stay, they would have implemented the vote and not pursued a second referendum. Thus, Claire believes that working class Leave voters are more tolerant than liberal left Remainers, who seemingly do not value the democratic process. This has led some scholars to suggest that it is the liberal left and not the rise of nationalism that threatens democracy[[71]](#endnote-71), since they have worked hard to stymie recent political earthquakes like Brexit which may disrupt the status quo. At the same time, those who espouse nationalistic views are cast as uneducated and idiotic, perhaps embodying ‘*reductio ad absurdum’[[72]](#endnote-72)*. Pete explains how calls for a second referendum:

“Does feel like a betrayal, having another vote when you don’t get your own way. It is like a child saying no. Well, no, do as you are told. If there was one [second referendum], what would be the point in voting? It would turn so many people off ever voting again.”

Although Julia voted Remain, she said:

"I don’t know whether it [second referendum] would change anything. And I think there would be a lot of people like me, who are just so sick of it, they wouldn’t even bother going to vote."

Quinn Slobodian outlines how many of neoliberalism’s early interlocutors were sceptical about democracy[[73]](#endnote-73). They believed it was a mechanism available to the masses which they may use to undermine market freedoms, capital’s movement and the maximisation of profitability, since it may empower the working class and embolden their demands for better working conditions and socioeconomic betterment. Neoliberalism’s founding fathers therefore believed that restricting democracy and sovereignty was essential, ensuring nation states served capital’s economic interests. As this book previously outlined, encasing the economy in transnational institutions was deemed important in ensuring the demands of the masses did not disturb the smooth functioning of the global economy and its reallocation of wealth from the bottom to the social structure’s top. Perhaps this is emblematic of the European Union, existing to enforce neoliberal ideals of market freedoms and capital movement, insulating economic policy decisions from critique and engendering feelings of political powerlessness[[74]](#endnote-74). Indeed, for Pete, a second referendum would potentially generate mass voter withdrawal; perhaps it could be argued that this would serve an important ideological function for neoliberal capitalism, ensuring the political demands of working-class people in places like Steel Town were omitted, while the system continued as life’s core background force.

With Parliament at a deadlock on Brexit throughout 2019, Boris Johnson called an election for December 12th, 2019, and promised to exit the EU. Whilst the Labour Party’s stance was rather ambiguous, it proposed to return to the EU and renegotiate a different exit deal. Richard Tuck branded this as a futile approach, given the EU possessed no incentive in allowing Britain to leave on good terms since it may incentivise other Eurosceptic nations like Italy, France, and Greece to Leave[[75]](#endnote-75). Ultimately, if the renegotiations failed, the Party was committed to implementing another referendum. Although the Party honoured the vote in 2017 and achieved relative electoral success, the Party suffered a historic and heavy loss in 2019. Emblematic of this was the collapse of the Red Wall, with many deindustrialised localities from South Wales to the Midlands and Northeast of England – such as Steel Town – electing a Conservative MP for the first time in over fifty years or longer[[76]](#endnote-76).

Although the research for this book finished in August 2019, I was able to get in touch with ten respondents after the collapse of the Red Wall and thus the Conservatives victory in Steel Town. Mia, Archie, and Roger voted Labour and claimed they were rather surprised with Steel Town’s result. They suggested that they thought it would be a very close election, though they did not expect a landslide Conservative victory. Capitalism realism, though, was deeply embedded in non-voters’ psyche like Ellie and Dave – both failed to vote again. Although Dave claimed he had no desire to vote, Ellie reiterated her previous beliefs, or non-belief – nothing can change. The former ICI and steelworker Matty, who was a lifetime Labour voter and Brexit supporter, also abstained, suggesting that politicians are a “waste of time”.

Nevertheless, Alice, Emma, Jimmy, and Jess voted Conservative. As Jimmy felt betrayed and abandoned by Labour, he was happy with Boris Johnson’s victory. He also suggested Labour were “trying to scupper it [Brexit], fomenting further feelings of political disillusionment. Indeed, Emma and Jess espoused similar views, with Jess stating: “put it this way, I was happy with the result”. Empirical evidence outlined in this book, supported by the other relatively small body of qualitative research on the recent rise of English nationalism[[77]](#endnote-77), perhaps indicate that the historic collapse of the Red Wall was rooted in negative politics, that is, a deeply ingrained dissatisfaction with the Labour Party which had been bubbling throughout the neoliberal era. Whilst political discontent is palpable in areas like Steel Town, the Labour Party failed to take seriously, and seek to implement, the form of anti-establishment backlash in Britain – Brexit[[78]](#endnote-78). In consequence, the relationship between the Left and many working-class people has now reached a historic low, with the Labour Party facing a historically unprecedented task in trying to win back votes in its former Northern heartlands and diminish their support for the new English nationalism.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored the nationalistic sentiments generated by the respondents’ totalizing experience of life in post-industrial Steel Town. New Labour continued the logic of neoliberalism, not least the deindustrialisation process, rebranding the party away from the traditional working class. Dissatisfaction with New Labour blended into a broader discontent with politics, with the idea that ‘they are all the same’ a regular refrain throughout the research. As most of the political class adhered to neoliberalism’s logic of awarding primacy to market forces, capitalist realism had hardened onto the respondents’ psyche, generating a non-belief in fundamental politico economic change. While Jeremy Corbyn attempted to remedy this drift somewhat, many could not simply disconnect his premiership from New Labour’s reign. Brexit was thus posited as a historic means to take forward the accumulative discontent about neoliberalism’s Symbolic Order, as well as a demand for sovereignty and democratic renewal against what was regarded as an undemocratic and unaccountable European Union.

Opinions on refugees were often conflated with immigrants and asylum seekers, though a striking characteristic was their complexity. While many expressed sympathies with those migrating from relatively impoverished or war-torn countries, they were chiefly viewed as an economic competitor for resources like jobs and housing in an epoch of intense competition. Therefore, a desire to regain control over peoples’ lives in areas like Steel Town was ubiquitous, with liberal leftist calls for open borders and tolerance cast as baseless, omitting the reality of life in Steel Town including deindustrialisation and a lack of well-paid jobs. The demands to implement a second referendum grew for over three years after June 2016, with most people in this research viewing it as betrayal and another example of politicians not listening to some working-class people. This possessed parallels to neoliberalism’s founding fathers, who were suspicious of democracy’s ability to empower the working class. The book now closes with a discussion of the Covid-19 pandemic and the future, both politically and socially, offering a tentative discussion on how capitalism may be set for epochal change once again.

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2. Goodall, L (2018) *Left for Dead? The Strange Death and Rebirth of the Labour Party*. London: William Collins. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jenkins, S (2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Badiou, A (2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Harvey, D (2011) *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. London: Profile Books Ltd, p.204. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Davis, J Lister, J & Wrigler, D (2015) *NHS for Sale: Myths, Lies & Deception*. London: The Merlin Press Ltd. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Mitchell, W & Fazi, T (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Hall, S (2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Eatwell, R & Goodwin, M (2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Fisher, M (2018) p.663 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Goodhart, D (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Embery, P (2020); Pabst, A (2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Johnston, A (2008) p.175 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Shipman, T (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Pabst, A (2019) p.24 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Gupta, S & Virdee, S (2020); Pitcher, B (2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Hall, S & Winlow, S (2020); Lind, M (2020); Telford, L & Wistow, J (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Henderson, A & Wyn Jones, R (2021) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Tuck, R (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Lapavitsas, C (2019); Lind, M (2020); Tuck, R (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Tuck, R (2020) p.148 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Zizek, S (2016) *Against the Double Blackmail*. Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, p.10 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Mitchell, W & Fazi, T (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Lapavitsas, C (2019); Lind, M (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Mitchell, W & Fazi, T (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Pabst, A (2019) p.14 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Fotopoulos, T (2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Shipman, T (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Goodfellow, M (2019) *Hostile Environment*. London: Verso; Milkman, R (2020) *Immigrant Labour and the New Precariat*. Cambridge: Polity Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Vargas-Silva C, Markaki, I & Sumption, M (2016) The Impacts of International Migration on Poverty in the UK. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Milkman, R (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Winlow, S Hall, S & Treadwell, J (2017) (2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Fisher, M (2018) p.770 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Zizek, S (2016) (2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Winlow, S Hall, S & Treadwell, J (2017); Zizek, S (2016) (2017) (2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Babones, S (2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Goodhart, D (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Bhambra, G Medien, K & Tilley, L (2020) Theory for a global age: From nativism to neoliberalism and beyond. Current Sociology. 68(2): 137-148. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Lind, M (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Hall, S & Winlow, S (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Tuck, R (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Murray, D (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Zalloua, Z (2020) p.67 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Zalloua, Z (2020) p.67 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Zizek, S (2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Callinicos, A (2010); Harvey, D (2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Zizek, S (2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Goodfellow, M (2019) p.104 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Hall, S (2012) p.172 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Winlow, S Hall, S & Treadwell, J (2017) (2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
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52. Zizek, S (2016) (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Hall, S & Winlow, S (2020); Winlow, S Hall, S & Treadwell, J (2017) (2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Zalloua, Z (2020); Zizek (2016) (2017) (2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Pfaller, R (2017) p.81 [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Murray, D (2019) p.158 [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Murray, D (2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Hall, S (2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Hall, S (2012) p.6 [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Traverso, E (2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Hall, S & Winlow, S (2020) p.67 [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Hall, S & Winlow, S (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Hall, S & Winlow, S (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Zalloua, Z (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Fisher, M (2009) p.17 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Tuck, R (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Lind, M (2020); Tuck, R (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Badiou, A (2012b) [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Hall, S & Winlow, S (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Streeck, W.G (2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Babones, S (2019); Eatwell, R & Goodwin, M (2018); Lind, M (2020); Winlow, S Hall, S & Treadwell, J (2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Lind, M (2020) p.90 [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Slobodian, Q (2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Lapavitsas, C (2019); Mitchell, W & Fazi, T (2017); Tuck, R (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Tuck, R (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
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78. Tuck, R (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-78)