Queer(y)ing Brexit: Sexuality and the Shifting Nature of Remainer and Leaver Worldviews

Brexit marks a seismic rupture in British and European politics, generating questions about national identity and community as well as the multitude of economic, constitutional and geopolitical consequences of Britain's departure from the European Union. However, largely omitted from these discussions has been the impact Brexit will have on Britain's LGBT+ communities. With hate crimes rising since June 2016 and a majority of Brexit-supporters opposing same-sex marriage (Townsend, 2016; Wells, 2019) for some LGBT+ individuals Brexit has engendered a sense of precarity and anxiety over their place in British society. Nevertheless, coupled with this have been attempts by some Remain/ Leave supporters to bolster their rivalling campaigns with the promise of inclusion, security and political self-actualisation for some LGBT+ Britons. This 'state of oscillation' (Dutta, 2014) makes it a ripe for a queer analysis. I use the Eve Sedgwick's understanding of 'queer' as a refusal to signify monolithically (Sedgwick, 1993) – identities are unstable, ever-shifting and can be constructed and consolidated by the forces of history and politics. There is an excess of meaning that goes beyond 'either/or' of binary categorical imperatives. This means going further than just looking at Brexit through the lens of 'LGBT+ rights', which focuses more narrowly on the de jure ramifications of a community that is presented as homogenous and siloed away from issues of race, class, gender and a host of other assemblages. Initially, it might seem that queer theory and the question of Brexit are two disparate entities that have very little overlap. However, using a queer approach we can see how Remain and Leave supporters have utilised discourses of sexuality to construct and consolidate their own rivalling political identities.

LGBT+ pride, national pride and being the "good guys" in the Brexit debate

This can be seen in the ways that elements of both sides of the Brexit divide have attempted to present themselves as defenders and promoters of 'LGBT+ rights'. Brexit is portrayed as imperilling or empowering those that are defined as LGBT+. This uses an understanding of sexuality that follows a homonormative logic. Originated by Lisa Duggan, homonormativity describes the assimilationist turn in Western 'gay' or 'LGBT+' movements in the 1990s. While the 1970s saw gay and trans pride movements fight for sexual liberation, the 90s and 2000s saw a greater move towards inclusion into the upper echelons of state and corporate power (Duggan, 2002). The salience of 'LGBT' as a rights-based identity marks a shift from earlier representations of queer sexuality and gender identity as perverse, degenerate, and in the wake of the AIDS pandemic, diseased and a danger to the national body politic. Instead of being seen as abject minorities living out at society's margins, the presence of LGBT+ pride has been increasingly been rendered an object of national pride in a growing number of Western countries. It is something that both sides, or elements of both sides at least, want to be associated with. LGBT+ rights is thus imbued with moral virtue and political capital.

For many Liberal Remainers, Brexit has been a catastrophe. Along with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Brexit signified the end of the 'end of history'. It has challenged the once popular idea that all of human society is on a linear progression towards a Liberal utopian endpoint. Central to the Remainer identity has been feelings of grief and anxiety. This has been articulated through the instrumentalization of LGBT+ rights. To take one prominent example, Johnathan Cooper, a gay-identifying human rights lawyer and Remain advocate, struck a mournful tone when he declared that "the elation of 2000 is replaced with a sense of foreboding… we're not just about to lose our rights, we're losing the very foundation of our liberation" (Cooper, 2018). A temporal narrative is being evoked here, the

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'elation of 2000' referring to the enshrining of the E.U. Charter of Fundamental Human Rights that Cooper believes lead to a "panoply of rights that could be applied to LGBT people" (Cooper, 2018). The European Union here is being identified as the main agent of progressive change for LGBT+ people, the foundation of their liberation. A nostalgia for the halcyon days of E.U. expansion in the 1990s and 2000s is here being evoked, showing how a positive vision of the past is being constructed in Cooper's projections of a dystopian future for LGBT+ Britons outside of the safety of E.U. membership. This shows that Remainers too can be nostalgic, a nostalgia that is being articulated through a discourse of LGBT rights. Those identified as LGBT+ were once empowered by being a part of the European 'community', now Brexit threatens to leave them imperilled.

A lot of Brexit supporters have views that can be politely described as 'traditional', with surveys taken shortly after the Referendum finding a majority of Leavers are against same sex marriage and LGBT-friendly sex education being taught in schools (Wells, 2019). Nonetheless, Brexit was propelled by a broad coalition and this includes some that identify as LGBT+ or those who want to present themselves as LGBT+ 'allies'. Boris Johnson, despite his own history of making homophobic remarks, made a direct appeal to LGBT+ voters in the run-up to the Referendum. Refusing the Remainer narrative that the E.U. is a haven for LGBT+ people, Johnson argued that rights were "under threat in Poland, in Hungary, in Romania and in other parts of the E.U. where rights aren't protected in the way they are in our country" (Pinknews, 2016). This is a view echoed strongly by Darren Grimes, the gay-identifying founder of BeLeave, a Brexit-supporting organisation that targeted young voters, who has argued that "it's a complete myth that any of these LGBT rights have come from the European Union, where many countries constitutionally ban same-sex marriage, enforce sterilisation for those who wish to change gender and ban LGBT people from serving in the military" (Grimes, 2018). These statements have two main effects. On the one hand they present Britain as exceptional, a world-leading bastion when it comes to sexual liberalism. On the other, they make a spatialising move, representing 'Europe' as filled with homophobic and transphobic Central and Eastern Europeans. This bigotry is presented as contagious, with east to west migration cast as a threat to the LGBT+ Briton. In ending freedom of moment, this narrative promises that Brexit will safeguard and empower Britain's LGBT+ individuals.

Nonetheless, Remainers too have used a discourse of LGBT+ rights to rarefy a domestic and international division. A separation from the E.U. imperils the LGBT+ community in the UK because it leaves them more exposed to the world outside. Lloyd Russell-Moyle, a gay Labour MP for Brighton Kemptown, has invoked the spectre of right-wing Trump-style populism to bolster his support for the Remain cause. He argues that *"without the protection of the E.U, this type of regressive populism could easily come to the UK. It will start with LGBT+ people but ends badly for us all* " (Russell-Moyle, 2019). The European Union here is represented as a zone of safety for LGBT+ people, a bastion of liberal tolerance while the world outside is rendered synonymous with a "regressive populism" that could jeopardise minority rights. This is echoed by the pro-Remain LGBT+ advocacy group – LGBT For Europe – who urge people to "come out to stay in" on *t*he basis of "which international leaders support Brexit? Only Trump and Putin. That's all you need to know to realise what an appalling policy Brexit is". In the Remainer worldview that has crystallised during and beyond the 2016 Referendum, the wider world outside the E.U. is one of danger and unpredictability, where political actors like Trump and Putin are free to disrupt and destabilise international norms. However, while the LGBT-minded Leave supporters have sought to cast the UK as an exceptionally strong bastion for LGBT+ rights, some Remain supporters have been more ambivalent when it comes to seeing the nation as a sanctuary. Gina Miller, for instance, has argued that "*outside of Europe, future British governments will have unconstrained freedom* " to implement changes to LGBT+ rights and employment (Miller, 2019). While Leavers see an independent and sovereign British polity as a boon for LGBT+ Britons, Miller and other Remainers warn that leaving the 'safety' of the E.U. can imperil Britain's LGBT+ communities. This underscores the way that competing temporal visions of Brexit as either utopian or dystopian are being articulated through this discourse of LGBT+ rights.

The queer logics of racialised exclusions

it would be wrong to think that queer studies as being exclusively the study of those that identify as LGBT+. Queer theory illuminates the wider constellations of power, knowledge and emotions that shape individuals, communities and even nation-states. Jasbir Puar, for instance, has coined the now widely-cited 'homonationalism' to describe the incorporation of some previously queer bodies into the imagined national community with Liberal states making gay pride a source of national pride and a sign of civilisational enlightenment and development (Puar, 2007). This is

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something that can have material consequences, with the exercise of statecraft being bound to the construction and consolidation of certain racialised and sexualised subjects. When it comes to Brexit, other understandings and representations of sexuality and gender identity have been deployed to consolidate the rivalling Leaver and Remainer worldviews. These are often racialised. We have already seen how the spectre of Eastern European bigotry has been used to justify stricter border controls. Brexiteers who have cast themselves as defenders of LGBT+ rights have tapped into wider War on Terror era discourses that have coalesced around 'Muslim' migration.

In June 2016 Omar Mateen gunned down 49 mostly queer people at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. At the time, Mateen was believed to have been linked to ISIS, which was in the midst of a terror campaign across Europe. Leave.eu, a UKIP-linked pro-Brexit organisation, sought to capitalise on this by urging Britons to "act now before we see an Orlando style atrocity here before too long" and that "Islamist extremism is a real threat to our way of life" (Mason, 2016). This was accompanied by a photo of men in Keffiyehs waving Kalashnikovs around. This equated European freedom of movement with ISIS-style terrorism, the latter being presented as being enabled by the former. Nigel Farage, in what is now considered an iconic image of the Brexit referendum, stood by a billboard depicting a line of mostly Middle Eastern and North African men with a caption declaring "Breaking point: The EU has failed us all" (Looney, 2017).

Taken together, these moves by Leavers present the Muslim migrant male as a threat to the British way of life. This taps into orientalist understandings of the Muslim migrant male as dangerous and threatening, with a sexuality that signifies disorder. Often it is the sexuality of this racialised and gendered representation that is presented as the source of the danger, with the hyper-masculine, sexually repressed and testosterone-driven Muslim migrant male depicted as a threat to Western women and LGBT+ communities. The Muslim migrant male has been rendered a 'queer' figure that signifies plurally as "deviant (Puar and Rai, 2002), represented as "both freakishly effeminate and monstrously misogynistic" (Manchanda, 2015). Rendered queer, the Muslim migrant male is given a productive power by Brexiteers, who use it to mobilise people to support a stricter border regime and construct Leavers as being the "good guys" who are pro-Brexit because they want to protect women and LGBT individuals from this racialised, gendered and sexualised threat.

Another representation that has been used to shape understandings of Brexit has been the 'left behind' Brexit supporter in the so-called 'red wall'. With Brexit now being increasingly portrayed a 'culture war', Brexit supporters have been keen to present themselves as the defenders of Britain's 'white working classes', who have been 'forgotten' by the 'woke' elites of Britain's Remain-supporting metropolitan centres. While the Muslim migrant male is made to signify disorder, the 'left-behind' Brexit supporter is used as an ordering device, directing political resources and capital to a 'forgotten' constituency. Representations of the left-behind Brexit supporter are structured by certain discourses of gender and sexuality. In order to win the 2019 general election, the Conservatives sought to make Brexit signify as a 'culture war' issue. Identifying Labour's working-class voters as 'traditionalists', it was suggested they could be won over with an appeal to their apparent social conservatism. The Times reported that "Number 10 has been polling "culture war" issues, such as transgender rights, to see whether they can be weaponised against Labour in northern working-class constituencies, but this would only reinforce the Tories' reputation among metropolitan liberals as the "nasty party" (The Times, Sept 2019). 'Transgender rights' are here rendered a 'culture wars issue', integral to the division between 'northern working-class constituencies' and 'metropolitan liberals'.

This spatialised framing has also been echoed by Matthew Goodwin, a prominent academic who is regularly cited on the topic of Brexit. Goodwin has argued that the 'shock' of Brexit can be blamed on the "middle classes from the big cities and the university towns" who "were comfortable talking about the rights of trans-sexuals and ethnic minorities but preferred to ignore the white working class" (Goodwin, 2020). This erases the fact that there are trans people and ethnic minorities. (indeed, those who are both trans and from an ethnic minority) who also live-in smaller towns and are economically precarious. Furthermore, these Brexit-narratives also implicitly reinforce an understanding of trans and other LGB rights as one located firmly within a politics of Liberalism rather than rooted in a working-class political activism. For instance, Nat Raha has written about the limits of 'trans liberalism' with its emphasis on de jure inclusion into the institutions of state power at the expense on paying attention to the material hardships and violence faced by many trans people (Raha, 2015).

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Like representations of the Muslim migrant male, the discourses around the left-behind Brexit supporter are also heavily racialised. Gurminder Bhambra has written about 'methodological whiteness' and how it distorts our picture of the way the contemporary working class is constituted by focusing on a particular demographic in a particular part of the country. In centring whiteness in representations of the working class, it treats a white perspective as a universal perspective (Bhambra, 2017). This ignores the multicultural nature of working-class life where Deliveroo drivers, nurses, carers, supermarket and warehouse workers, beauticians, hospitality workers work in increasingly precarious conditions and large numbers of whom can be found in the big metropolitan centres that propelled the Remain vote. Nevertheless, whiteness confers a certain amount of respectability on the 'left-behind' Brexit supporter, representing them as symbolic of a lost form of nationhood that needs to be restored through Brexit (Shilliam, 2018).

Brexit produced a period of instability and flux for British politics. Decades-long political attachments wavered, new parties were formed and quickly crumbled, while the British Union itself has been strained by surging English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish Republican sentiment. This state of oscillation can be seen in the ambiguous and contradictory approach to those identified as 'LGBT+' and the other racialised and sexualised formations that have been foregrounded since 2016. On the one hand there are attempts by some Remainers and Leavers to appeal to a unitary and homogenous LGBT+ subject, yet at the same time there is rhetoric that traffics in trans-exclusion and social conservatism. This underscores what queer theorists have long identified as the unstable, ever-shifting and fragmentary nature of subject-formation. This can be found within the LGBT+ subject that frequents the macro-level discourses of Remainers and Leavers. Far from being unified and homogenous, the LGBT+ is rife with a lot of tensions, hierarchies and exclusions. To take one example, The LGB Alliance is trans-exclusionary and were founded in 2019 in opposition to moves by Stonewell, a rights advocacy group for gays and lesbians, to adopt more trans-inclusive policies. The LGB Alliance believe that society is now in danger of 'transing out the gay' and that lesbians face "extinction" at the hands of "transgenderism" (Tominey, 2020). Their cause has been taken up by the staunch Brexit-supporting Daily Telegraph and the Spectator, where commentator Brendan O'Neil who has condemned the 'cult of genderfluidity' that "poses a risk to the rights of people who are attracted to the people of the same sex" (O'Neill, 2020). This highlights the new alliances that have crystallised in this volatile political period, again underscoring the unstable and ever-changing nature of political identities and alliances.

Conclusion

In summary, I have used a queer analytic to see how Remain and Leave supporters have utilised discourses of sexuality to rarefy the Remain-Leave binary antagonism that dominated British politics in the aftermath of the 2016 Referendum. In particular, I have highlighted the discourse of LGBT+ rights that elements of both sides have instrumentalised in order to imbue their stance on Brexit with moral virtue. However, 'LGBT+ rights' is just one contingent understanding of sexuality and gender identity that has been used to structure competing visions of Brexit. Other discourses of sexuality and gender identity have been operationalised to signify order and/or disorder. These are also highly racialised. The homonormative LGBT Briton and the 'left behind' Brexit supporter have both been folded into the nationalist imaginary and deemed worthy of political attention, investment and protection. However, other discursive formations, like the migrant Muslim male, the Eastern European, and those deemed too "woke" for inclusion, like trans and non-binary identities, have been rendered queer. Signifying danger and disorder, these threatening and disruptive queer representations are used to justify policies of exclusion. Rather than treat these formations as just existing in abstract discourses, they have important material consequences, directing forms of statecraft and leaving some individuals and communities. Not only do they serve to consolidate the rivalling Leave and Remain worldviews, but they also rarefy a domestic/international division.

Rather than treat sexuality as a stand-alone issue, a queer theoretical perspective allows us to see how it structures and is structured by ideas of race, nationhood, class, gender and a multiplicity of other assemblages in ways that are mutually constitutive. As this study demonstrates, sexuality is not a stand-alone issue that can be siloed away from the key theoretical questions that animate IR scholars. With the international arena increasingly dominated by the forces of a right-wing politics of exclusion and authoritarianism, a queer-lens is integral in shedding light on how these forces are constituted by discourses of sexuality. Far from being merely discursive, these understandings of sexuality have material consequences that are highly relevant to the field of IR. These discourses play an integral role in generating policy agendas and directing the resources of statecraft both towards and away from certain

populations at both the national and international level.

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About the author:

Jack Lindsay is a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex. His thesis explores how representations of sexuality is used as a way of constructing and consolidating a political and cultural identities around Brexit, and the ways this intersects with race and the legacy of Empire.