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BREXIT, EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY AND ONTOLOGICAL (IN)SECURITY

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This article explores how the Brexit Referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union has been a source of destabilisation, dread and ontological anxiety. Focusing mainly on British citizens who voted or self-identified as 'Remainers', and on EU foreign nationals resident in the UK, it shows how existential anxieties have had different points of focus for different groups of people. Confronted with such destabilising anxieties, the article shows how people have adopted different mechanisms designed to reassert a sense of order and certitude often viewed as central to preserving ontological security. The ways in which this has been done, however, can themselves raise important questions.

Key Words: Brexit Referendum, Ontological Security, Anxiety, Everyday Security, UK

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Introduction

"I'm a British Mummy, he is a Polish Daddy, and this is our little baby European."
(cited at Neild and Masters 2016)

On the 23rd June 2016 the United Kingdom (UK) held its advisory referendum on whether the country should seek to leave the European Union (EU), the shorthand of which has become known as the Brexit referendum. By the morning of the 24th the result had been declared, with 51.9% voting in favour of leaving and 48.1% voting against. The country was – and remains – divided on the issue.[1] This split, however, is not just a matter of political differences, but has, from the beginning, exhibited deep emotional, psychological and even existential elements. For many of the victors – the leavers, the Brexiteers – the result was greeted with joy and euphoria.[2] For many of them the vote signalled 'getting our country back (from Brussels)', reclaiming freedom, sovereignty and control, and the chance to make 'Britain great again', all sentiments that had characterised the Leave campaign's sloganeering and that continue to shape much of the popular political discourse on the Brexit negotiations that officially began in March 2017.

For many of 'the 48%' – the Remainers – but also for many non-national residents ineligible to vote[3] but strongly in favour of Britain's continued EU membership, the result provoked a different outpouring of emotions – including disillusion, anguish, fear, anxiety, betrayal, anger and despair. Indeed, for many Remainers the world appeared to have been turned upside down… or worse. As Toni Carlton, a childminder from London, told CNN: 'It felt like the world was ending right there. It sounds dramatic, but I just felt like burying my head in the pillow and screaming' (quoted in Neild and Masters 2016). Carlton's reaction expressed the feeling, the anxiety, that the world, her world, was fundamentally transforming, that key markers of

[1] This is partly because 'the 52%', as it has become known, comprised only c.37% of registered voters and c.26% of the country's population (The Electoral Commission n/d).
[2] But not all. Some Leave voters also found the result shocking, not least because they did not expect Leave to win and were often not voting about the EU as such, but rather lodging a more general protest vote.
[3] Including c.3.3 million EU non-nationals (Low 2017).

stability and everyday assumptions that provide individuals with a sense of surety, were being destabilised.

Likewise, the day following the referendum, Abbey Urbanski, an Englishwoman from York, posted a family picture on Instagram. As she stated, 'I'm a British Mummy, he is a Polish Daddy, and this is our baby European'. Encapsulated in this was not simply a statement of fact, but also an expression of anxiety, of feeling 'numb… and at a loss as to what the future holds for our little family unit' (quoted in Neild and Masters 2016). This is a feeling that has been shared by many Remainers who, whether with respect to their immediate family, or their broader senses of social and collective identity, also feel numb, anxious and a sense of loss. Unlike for many Brexiteers, who see a future of opportunities and new horizons (at least for now), most Remainers see the future in much less open and inviting terms.

Drawing on the ontological (in)security literature in International Relations this article focuses on Brexit as a source of destabilisation, dread and ontological anxiety primarily for those people who 'lost' the referendum. For these people Brexit has been experienced as a 'critical situation' (Giddens 1991) fundamentally destabilising and challenging established worldviews, routines and core conceptions of selfhood, and not least, notions of societal trust, a source of anxiety that goes beyond more rationalist concerns about the economic and political consequences of Brexit.[4] In doing so it also contributes to the growing emphasis in the discipline on manifestations of the international in the politics of the everyday – in this case of people's everyday family, social and working lives – while in turn emphasising how such everyday politics can have potentially broader political implications.

The article begins by briefly discussing the literature on ontological security, paying particular attention to several mechanisms through which ontological security is generated. In particular, emphasis is placed on the role of biographical narratives of self-identity, the routinisation of everyday practices, the importance of recognition and shame dynamics,

[4] Importantly, as the post-referendum period has unfolded existential anxieties have also increased markedly amongst Brexiteers. There are various explanations for this including: fears that Brexit is being sold out, unease at accusations of racism levelled against Leavers, the messy nature of the process and the realisation that Brexit is unlikely to provide the fulfilment desired. This paper focuses on Remainers for reasons of space, while the anxieties of Leave voters have been tackled in a partner paper (Browning under review).

vicarious identification with a larger community, the role of home and family in establishing a sense of sanctuary, and temptations towards the securitisation of existential anxieties into tangible objects of fear and blame. The article then analyses how Brexit has generated a range of different anxieties, principally amongst Remainers, and does so by breaking Remainers down into two key groups: British citizens and European residents.

Ontological Security

Discussions of ontological security start from the premise that existential anxieties are embedded in the very condition of human existence and are driven by awareness of our possible nonbeing (Tillich 2014, p. 38; also, Heidegger 2010; Kierkegaard 1980; Giddens 1991; Laing 1969). These anxieties are always with us, a background condition that may be both generative of action and possibility, an invocation to make the most of our lives (e.g. Heidegger 2010; Inwood 2000), but which can also be potentially overwhelming, generating a sense of paralysis and despair.

Tillich (2014, pp. 41-2, 45) argues existential anxieties come in three forms. The first concerns *anxieties of fate and death* and relate to awareness that our temporal and physical existence is inherently contingent and which drives subjects to locate themselves in time and space as a counter to the ever present threat of non-existence. When the temporal and spatial being of subjects is challenged such anxieties can therefore be activated. The second concerns *anxieties of emptiness and meaninglessness.* This concerns man's need for 'spiritual self-affirmation' through the upholding of cosmological systems of meaning that, however symbolic or indirect, provide answers 'to the question of the meaning of existence'. Such systems provide a sense of 'ultimate concern… a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings' (Tillich 2014, p. 45). Existential anxieties emerge whenever the anchors of established belief systems break down, either as result of 'external events or inner processes', with this potentially generating anxieties of separation and estrangement from the world and a despair and doubt in truth and the nature of reality (Tillich 2014, pp. 45-6). Third, there are *anxieties of guilt and condemnation*, which concern people's need to feel a sense of purpose, destiny and moral self-affirmation. People, Tillich (2014, pp. 48-9) argues, are required to

answer for what they have made of themselves and to live up to their sense of moral being. This can leave individuals susceptible to anxieties of (self-)rejection, condemnation and shame, of feeling lost and estranged from themselves and their destiny, particularly when subject to criticism from others (also see Rumelili 2015, p. 12). Tillich (2014, pp. 53-8) argues that while all three forms of anxiety are always present and deeply interconnected their relative importance in different contexts changes. In the context of Brexit, it is arguably anxieties of *emptiness and meaninglessness* and of *guilt and condemnation* that have been most apparent, while questions of fate and death have been largely absent.

Taking the existence of such background anxieties as a fundamental part of the human condition, the ontological security literature has focused on how individuals and collectives manage to cope with and 'bracket out' such anxieties, thereby enabling us to 'go on' with everyday life without being overwhelmed and drifting into melancholic or psychotic states (Giddens 1991, pp. 35-42). This requires individuals to establish a sense of 'basic trust' in other persons and the nature of reality, and where such trust provides 'a sort of *emotional inoculation* against existential anxieties' (original emphasis Giddens 1991, p. 39; Kinnvall et al this volume). A focus on ontological security therefore requires emphasising the extent to which individuals are socially embedded, not simply seeking to try 'to secure the coherence of *self*, but rather the coherence and stability of their broader social context' (original emphasis Pratt 2017, p. 81; Croft 2012, p. 23). This also means seeking to secure the various sets of collective signifiers (e.g. national identity) with which they identify and that in turn provide a basis for agency.[5]

As indicated, to cope with existential anxieties of fate and death, emptiness and meaninglessness and of guilt and condemnation, it is imperative for people to anchor themselves in space and time and to establish cognitive frameworks of cosmic meaning about the nature of their salient world, their role within it and their direction of travel. This can be achieved via a variety of interconnected and reinforcing mechanisms and practices, with six

[5] This therefore avoids debates about the validity of scaling up ontological security from the individual to the collective level (e.g. Croft 2012, pp. 29-32; Krolikowski 2008; Mitzen 2006, p. 352; Steele 2008, pp. 15-20), a debate that arguably misses the fact that discourse and subjects are not ontologically separate realms and that as such people have different identities at different levels of generalisation (Solomon 2015, p. 63).

noted here that have been particularly evident in the post-referendum context. Since ontological security enhancement is, for the most part, a largely reflexive, instinctive and somewhat sub/unconscious activity it is often only when it becomes challenged that such ontological security seeking practices can be identified and seen for what they are. It is the destabilisation of such mechanisms that the Brexit vote has exposed.

First, there is widespread agreement that a prerequisite for establishing a sense of ontological security is the generation of a biographical narrative of self-identity that locates the self in a particular time and place and in regard to other significant identities and actors. This, as Steele (2008, pp. 10-12) notes, helps individuals establish a sense of the nature of their salient environment, providing a cognitive framework through which everyday events, interactions and relationships can be comprehended, ordered and processed. In general, it is believed that maintaining stability and consistency in one's self-identity narratives is central to enhancing the sense of ontological security, whereas fractured, unclear or inconsistent biographical narratives may foster anxiety (Solomon 2017).

Second, it is argued that ontological security is also often enhanced through the routinisation of everyday practices (Giddens 1991, pp. 39-41). Such routines will often be mundane, but no less important for that. For instance, getting up at a set time Monday-Friday, dropping one's children off at school, checking one's email and preparing lectures are all fundamental, not only in carrying out one's responsibilities as a parent and lecturer, but also in reaffirming the very sense of identity and purpose one derives from those identifications. Moreover, during crises mundane everyday routines can quickly become deeply significant, ontologically and politically. For example, following the Paris terrorist attack in November 2015 everyday routines like drinking coffee in bars and cafes gained a deep sense of ontological significance, recast as a resolute act of resistance and as a civilizational statement and marker of French identity and values – all encapsulated in the popularised social media meme 'Je suis en terrasse' (Browning 2018).

Third, Steele (2005) has argued that actors will seek to avoid actions that might potentially generate condemnation and shame at failing to live up to whom one claims to be. This relates to Tillich's (2014, pp. 48-9) concern with anxieties of guilt and condemnation, which he argues

plays on our understanding of humans as moral beings responsible to ourselves and to others (and God) for our actions. Steele (2005), however, adds a further political dimension to this, noting how shaming tactics can be used to activate such self-condemnatory existential anxieties in others in order to push preferred political agendas. The denial of recognition for whom one claims to be can be deeply distressing, and in the case analysis appears in various forms.

Fourth, individuals often generate a sense of ontological security through vicariously identifying with broader communities – e.g. nations (Kinnvall 2004, pp. 742-4; Marlow 2002, p. 247; Krolikowski 2008; Browning 2018). Vicarious identification entails 'living through' the experiences and achievements of others, appropriating them as if they happened to oneself (Goldstein and Cialdini 2007). Vicarious identification can perform at least two ontological security enhancing functions. First, and particularly evident with national communities – where the nation is often anthropomorphised as a living independent being – it can help salve anxieties about fate and death by establishing an illusion of immortality by proxy (Berenskoetter 2010). Second, it can also enhance the individual's sense of self-esteem, compensate for their own failings and thereby ward off anxieties of guilt and condemnation, by enabling the individual to internalise the community's collective achievements. Of course, this also means that vicarious identification can potentially backfire, especially in situations (like Brexit for many Remainers) when the collective acts in unexpected, undesirable and what are felt to be 'shameful' ways.

Fifth, it is argued that existential anxieties about the unknown are frequently refracted onto tangible objects of fear that can be prepared for or countered in some way (Rumelili 2015, p. 14; Croft 2012). As Tillich (2014, pp. 35-7) argues in respect of death, people have a tendency not to dwell on the condition of actual non-existence, finding the prospect of the unknown and the threat of nothingness unbearable and a source of deep dread. Such thoughts are instead typically shifted onto possible causes of death – something which can be prepared for and met with courage (Tillich 2014, pp. 35-7). Anxieties about guilt and condemnation or about emptiness and meaninglessness can be met likewise. In particular, within international politics emerging anxieties about a collective's (e.g. a nation's) identity, standing and role are often redirected away from a self-reflective analysis of the community's own shortcomings in

favour of sanctifying essentialised claims about self-identity while simultaneously identifying and securitising those others (enemies) that are seen to be putting the self in question (Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006; Malksoo 2015). In short, those others who can be tangibly identified, feared and blamed.

Lastly, individuals will also seek to generate a sense of ontological security through the cultivation of a particular place and set of (typically family) relationships as representing 'home' (Dupuis and Thorns 1998; Kinnvall et al this volume). Like vicarious identification, 'home' can offer an 'aura of permanence' (Heath-Kelly 2016), but more particularly can be viewed as an idealised sanctuary and 'site of constancy in the social and material environment… a secure base on which identities are constructed' (Kinnvall 2004, p. 747). Home is therefore typically idealised as a place of roots and grounding, a place of unquestioned acceptance that you can always return to, a place of safety and certitude in an uncertain world. However, when home is 'lost', or when one no longer feels welcome in one's home or is told to leave, feelings of betrayal and dread can quickly follow.

Importantly, these six ontological security enhancing mechanisms are closely interwoven. For instance, processes of vicarious identification are clearly deeply embedded within biographical narratives of self-identity, as are notions of home and family and practices of securitisation. Similarly, routines often exist as further manifestations of these aspects, not just reflecting them, but reproducing them into the future. However, while such mechanisms can help provide for a sense of ontological security that brackets out key questions about identity and meaning, they can also be disrupted by 'critical situations', which Giddens (1984, p. 61) defines as: 'circumstances of radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind which affect substantial numbers of individuals, situations that threaten or destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines'. As Croft (2012, p. 25) notes, critical situations are as such social crises that challenge 'established beliefs and ways of doings things…[and]… emphasize the fragility of ontologically secure entities' precisely because they disrupt everyday routines, identities, trust structures and the sense of social stability (also Pratt 2017, p. 81). When this happens subjects are required to reflexively respond by re-instantiating or adapting routines and self-identity narratives in processes that are often fraught with anxiety.

In the following, evidence for the above sets of discourses, sentiments and practices has been sought through focusing on first person pronouncements reported in mainstream media articles and interviews or posted on social media, since these constitute one of the only ways to identify people's feelings at specific moments in time, and in particular with respect to how people experienced Brexit in the immediate days and weeks after the vote. Saying this, while most of the empirical material consulted dates to the immediate days and weeks following the referendum, later material is also used to highlight how the ontologically destabilising effects of Brexit have been enduring. The ontological anxieties of Brexit are therefore not superficial and (writing almost two years after the referendum) many Remainers are still to 'get over it' or remain unable to 'move on' as Leave-camp supporters often suggest they should.

Through such sources we can identify how the Brexit referendum raised (and continues to raise) challenges with respect to people's biographical narratives of self-identity, their relationships with the idea of 'home' and with different broader communities of vicarious identification. We can also see how Brexit has generated a range of emotions, amongst which feelings of betrayal and shame are particularly notable, and which in turn has resulted in tendencies towards securitisation. Last, we can also see how Brexit has resulted in people changing or questioning established everyday routines, bringing home to them how such previously taken for granted practices have provided a sense of ontological security that many now experience as fragile.

Case Analysis

Turning to the case analysis Brexit appears (and has been constructed) as just one such 'critical situation' generating widespread feelings of ontological anxiety and insecurity amongst Remainers, beyond more rationalist interest-based concerns about possible lost economic, educational and travel opportunities. Rather than the confident projections of a future free from Europe's shackles and of reclaimed sovereignty and control that characterised many in the Leave camp, Remainers have tended to experience Brexit as generating deep levels of uncertainty and destabilisation at both an individual and collective

level. Routines have been destabilised while established attachments, identities and notions of social trust have been fundamentally challenged. Certainly, some of the anguish and strength of feeling experienced amongst Remainers resulted from the largely unexpected – and therefore (for them) doubly-shocking – nature of the result, something few commentators or pollsters (or even Leave campaign leaders) anticipated. However, these concerns have affected different groups of people differently, with different sets of ontological anxieties being activated. Most broadly we can distinguish between British citizens and European residents, though these groups can also be sub-divided in various ways. However, all such distinctions should be treated cautiously, as should any claim to suggest that people in one group necessarily experienced things one way rather than another. Even so, trends can still be identified since because of different legal, material and attributional factors Brexit has tended to emphasise different sorts of questions for different sets of people.

British Citizens

It is useful to start with Remainers who are British citizens, many of whom were eligible to vote in the referendum, but not all. For instance, people under the age of 18 were not allowed to vote, in contrast to the referendum on Scottish independence where 16-18 year olds were enfranchised. This has resulted in considerable feeling amongst younger generations – who were significantly in favour of Remain as a group (75% of under 24 year olds according to a YouGov poll – Goulard 2016) – that they have been sold out by older voters (Cresci 2016). Setting that aside for now a number of more general observations might be made about the nature of the ontological anxieties raised amongst Remainers by the Brexit vote.

First, one of the most tangible reactions immediately after the vote, and one emphasising the extent to which the vote has been experienced as a 'critical situation' in the Giddensian sense, was a deep sense of shock. As noted above, for one Remainer it was like waking up and finding that 'the world was ending'. For many this was accompanied by a deep sense of loss, with people feeling 'sad' (BBC 24 June 2016) and 'heartbroken' (Icklenellierose 2016). For some the vote was greeted like a bereavement to be grieved and mourned (Cyprus Mail 2016; Matthews 2016). Tangible in these sentiments was the feeling that the 'future… [was being]…

taken away' (Cresci 2016). In this respect, Brexit unleashed anxieties of emptiness and meaninglessness, challenging established cosmological views (Spicer 2016). More specifically, this grief and sense of loss was linked to questions of being, therefore challenging people's biographical narratives of self-identity. The following interventions are indicative.

> 'It's absolutely ridiculous', said a civil servant. 'I cannot believe we've gone out. I'm an entrenched European, my girlfriend's German, my car is German, it's ridiculous' (BBC 24 June 2016).

> 'Those of us for whom being in the European Union was an important part of our identity now feel like strangers in a strange land' ("Thunderbay" in comments section of Frostrup 2016).

The first comment parallels that of Abbey Urbanski in the Introduction, but in all instances there is a sense of losing a core element of self-hood. Brexit is experienced as taking something away that, whether previously consciously realised or not, was now held dear and as fundamental to people's sense of who they are. Indeed, this sense of Brexit signalling the stripping away of European aspects of British identity existed despite the Leave campaign's insistence that leaving the EU did not make Britain and Britons any less European. By contrast, insofar as the opposite has been felt it indicates precisely how EU membership – and the status of EU citizenship it affords – has become equated with being European.

It is also evident, therefore, that for many Remainers the EU had become (or became in the context of the referendum) a source of vicarious identification. Trying to capture her sense of heartbreak, the video blogger 'Icklenellierose' (2016), therefore emphasised how EU membership meant 'not just being our own little island, separate from everything else. [But] Feeling like you belong to a wider community'. Others expressed this by listing and reflecting on the 'European project's' longer term achievements (e.g. Ramgobin 2016), which in future could no longer be appropriated as our own, but where a sense of shame also pervaded at having potentially jeopardised them for the future. Indeed, many Remainers have felt impelled to express remorse and apologise to fellow Europeans, indicating that anxieties of guilt and condemnation were also activated along with those of emptiness and

meaninglessness (e.g. “Greatbearlake” in comments section of Silverstone and Williams 2016).

Not everyone, however, has been willing to accept this loss of European identity – as expressed through EU membership – lying down. For instance, otherwise apparently mundane routines and symbols have become the focus of considerable attention. One example concerns the ‘burgundy’ British passport, presently symbolic of both British and European citizenship, but which for Leave campaigners, like UKIP on/off leader Nigel Farage, has been more specifically symbolic of Britain’s subjugation to Europe and of Britain’s open borders to European migrants. Whilst campaigning Farage often flourished his ‘Europeanised’ passport to signify that getting Britain back would mean returning to an exclusively British passport (Farage 2016; BBC 16 September 2016). Since the referendum the British passport’s future pigmentation has thus been raised as a symbolic issue, with Brexiteers wanting a return to the blue of previous years to clearly mark the break with Europe, and where associated feelings of sovereignty, independence and control can be activated in future at the level of individual practice whenever one approaches passport control (Mortimer 2016). Remainers, of course, do not wish to lose the European British passport and what it symbolises and enables. Significantly, since Brexit tens of thousands of British nationals have applied for dual citizenship in various EU countries – Ireland a particular favourite[6] – with this indicative of attempts to preserve an established ‘European’ sense of ‘home’. While this does not entail giving up British citizenship, it does mean holding on to European citizenship as well. Others, however, have gone further with spikes noted on search engines with respect to emigrating from mainland Britain to countries in the EU or places like Gibraltar and Canada; i.e. Remainers seeking out ‘new homes’ (CBS News 24 June 2016).

However, for many Remainers Brexit has not only destabilised biographical narratives of self-identity connected to one’s sense of belonging to Europe, it has also resulted in significant anxieties about that identity which the Leave camp claims Brexit is reclaiming – the idea of Britishness. While it might be assumed that most British citizens (Remainers or Leavers) would still feel secure in their Britishness, this has not been so. Indeed, as indicated in the second of

[6] Applications for Irish passports were up 106% on the year before by November 2016 (Marsh 2017a).

the indented quotes above, Brexit was also accompanied by a sense of alienation for many, of 'feeling like strangers in a strange land'. For some Remainers home no longer feels like home at all. There are various elements and manifestations of this, while it arguably affects different groups in different ways.

At a general level confusion is evident amongst Remainers that the Britain they thought existed was nothing but an illusion. This is often expressed in terms of a country that they thought believed in 'unity and friendship' as the way forward for everyone transforming in the face of isolationism and narrow self-interest, with anticipated worrying effects. 36 year-old Londoner Carrie Dunn, for instance, admitted to being 'terrified for the future' and fully expected the UK to break up in due course (quoted in Neild and Masters 2016) – a concern given credence with the Scottish Nationalist Party's calls for a second referendum on Scottish independence.

However, many Remainers also see a much darker side to the Brexit vote, one that activates – at least as much as the sense of shame at letting Europe down does – anxieties of guilt and condemnation and generates feelings of deep unease and shame about what sort of constitutive values Brexit is seen to have unleashed and legitimised. A Britain previously hailed as 'a home for Enlightenment values' (Hutton 2017) is instead depicted as 'returned to the Dark Ages of ignorance and hatred' (Cliff James quoted in Dearden 2017). Remainers' sense of alienation from this Britain is perhaps best captured in responses to UKIP leader Nigel Farage's speech shortly after the referendum result was called, which he declared to be 'a victory for real people. A victory for ordinary people. A victory for decent people' (*The Guardian* 24 June 2016). As @Jenni_Bird1 reacted, 'A victory "for real people" says Farage. Oh. I didn't realise I don't exist. #EUref' (Specia and O'Neill 2016).

Framed this way many Remainers have experienced Brexit and its aftermath as problematically divisive and an attempt to deprive them of a say on Britain's future relations with the EU, a sentiment captured in frustrations at generic proclamations by the Leave campaign and the post-Brexit UK government that 'Brexit means Brexit' and that 'the British people have spoken/the will of the people is clear', with Brexit increasingly depicted in terms of a 'hard Brexit' leaving the UK outside of both the Single Market and the EU's free trade

area. For many Remainers statements like Farage's have been understood as a direct attack that depicts Remainers as members of an almost traitorous and undemocratic liberal metropolitan elite divorced from the concerns of 'real, ordinary and decent' people. It also comes on the back of a continuing populist rejection of 'experts' and 'expertise', suggesting a more general breakdown in societal trust structures (compare with Krahmann in this volume – Steele draft).

In turn, though, Remainers have themselves been prone to re-emphasise this sense of a divided nation by depicting Leave voters as stupid racist bigots (e.g. "Greatbearlake" in comments section of Silverstone and Williams 2016) – a problematic projection designed to shame Leave voters, but one that overlooks the existence of other arguments for Brexit (e.g. the so-called Lexit position) beyond that of the caricature of parochial small-minded racist nationalism of much Remainer commentary. Indeed, such caricatures have also generated anxiety for many Brexit voters who find themselves denied due recognition of their own claims to subjectivity, and dismissed as racists instead. However, insofar as Remainers have embraced this binary then it has also manifested in a deep sense of shame about the country and even about one's own nationality. As one Conservative MEP put it on gaining his newly-applied for Irish passport, 'I am quite ashamed to be British in many ways' (quoted in McDonald 2017). Or as expressed by Wolfsz:

> 'I had thought there was an undercurrent of racism in society but did not imagine it was as great as this, or as intensely vile. I am now ashamed to admit [to] fellow Europeans that I am British as I now feel truly tainted by their truly awful decision' (in comments section of Frostrup 2016).

Remainers have therefore experienced Brexit as a betrayal of core British values, with this accompanied by a loss of trust in fellow citizens now viewed in disparaging terms. For this group of Remainers the sanctity of 'home' and of vicarious identification with the nation as a source of ontological security enhancement has become deeply tainted. Indeed, this mixed sense of distrust and disgust has even affected people's closest family and personal relationships, which in some cases have fundamentally broken down. For instance, a survey conducted by the relationship and counselling charity, Relate, found that one-fifth of their 300 relationship support counsellors were working with clients arguing over Brexit (Marsh

2017b). Others, meanwhile, are adamant that they could not have a relationship with a Brexit supporter, let alone start a family with one, while others suggest even friendship is an unlikely possibility (see comments section to Frostrup 2016). Similarly, in light of the referendum vote's generational divide there are also cases of children struggling to maintain civil relations with their parents/grandparents.[7] Brexit, therefore, has clearly been experienced at a deeply ontological level and not viewed merely as a political issue. Indeed, the fact that Brexit cut across lines of political party affiliation is perhaps one further indicator of this.

Furthermore, insofar as Remainers view Brexit voters as 'the biggest traitors this country has seen' ("Havingalavrov" in comments section to Frostrup 2016) then elements of securitising anxieties about self-identity and the unknown nature of the future into identifiable objects of blame and fear (i.e. Brexit voters), is also apparent. Such a securitising move arguably serves to re-instantiate a sense of order in what is experienced as a new chaotic situation. In such discussion we therefore see how core relationships and narratives of self-identity are being realigned and where new certainties can be derived from positioning the self against those others who Remainers feel let down and betrayed by. Of course, not all Remainers experience these sentiments in the same way or with the same intensity. For instance, many Remainers are keen to distinguish between a mass of largely ignorant and gullible Brexit voters and the outright scoundrels whose 'bullshit' they swallowed.[8] In such a framing, though, while the masses are redeemable, they also remain disrespected and a potential source of future dangers.

Fundamentally important, however, is how the above points to the rupture of relationships within the British polity – a country experiencing what Lupovici (2012) calls a fundamental

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[7] To give one example: 'I'm in a similarly awful position but with my family. I was for Remain and they for Brexit. I have no problem with having different political allegiance being a centrist myself but this is so much more. Even six weeks on I am full of pain and anger at the decision but worse I can't see my family the same way. They are diminished in my eyes and since I 'can't get over it and see that blood is thicker than water' as my Mum would like I now don't see them. I respect their right to choose but they can't seem to accept my right to be disgusted by the choice they made. I am now dealing with awful consequences of the vote at work which I can't discuss with them. I wish so much that I could just see them as they once were and keep hold of the love they deserve but for me it's changed everything. It's making me utterly wretched and they are bemused and impatient. It's destroyed something I don't think we'll ever recover. I hope I'm wrong but it feels like a permanent break' ("346cmt" in comments section to Frostrup 2016).

[8] Interestingly both positions can sometimes be identified in single posts, thereby suggesting that the distinction is often blurred in people's minds (see "Havingalavrov" in comments section to Frostrup 2016).

sense of ontological dissonance riven by clashing and apparently irreconcilable identity narratives. Indeed, with the securitisation and the reduction of political life down to two caricatured and mutually opposed identities, there is even a question as to whether the very notion that Remainers and Leavers inhabit the same polity is breaking down. In short, there is a break-down of social trust – something obviously also fostered by the 'post-truth' nature of the referendum campaign (particularly evident in the Leave campaign) in which each side accused the other of lies and manipulation. This environment is one where a mutually reinforcing spiral of ontological insecurity (Lupovici draft) cannot be discounted and prospects for a more informed debate on the post-Brexit situation that escapes reducing the issue down to mutually opposing discourses of identity becomes increasingly difficult.

British Minorities

Before discussing non-British residents, it is also important to consider one group of British citizens for whom the Brexit vote has raised a rather particular set of ontological anxieties. This concerns racial, ethnic and religious minorities – a notable number of whom actually voted for Brexit[9] – but also the LGBT community. Irrespective of voting preference many people within these categories have evidently had very disorienting and disturbing experiences following the Brexit vote. Thus, while many Remainers have felt that their identification with their homeland has become tainted – with some even considering trading in their British citizenship because of how Brexit is seen as refuting core British/European values – many people in minority groups have become anxious that 'home' has become decidedly unsafe and unwelcoming.

Following the referendum reports of racist physical and verbal attacks rose noticeably,[10] as did those against the LGBT community (Weber 2016), as did reporting of them – an important point that has also likely served to generate anxieties. However, the implicitly racist nature of aspects of the Leave campaign has clearly fed into this.[11] While these developments have also directly affected non-British residents (see below), for this group of British nationals Brexit

[9] According to one poll 50-60% of Christian, Jewish, White and Sikh groups voted for Brexit, whereas less than 35% of Mixed Race, Asian, Muslim, Chinese, Hindu and Black groups voted that way (Lambert 2016).
[10] The Home Office reported a 41% increase in racially and religiously aggravated offences between July 2015 and July 2016 (Corcoran and Smith 2016, p. 1).
[11] On the integral link between racism and homophobia see (Weber 2016).

has often been experienced in quite distinct terms. Like non-British foreign residents their experiences have often been very direct and intimate at street level, such as in the case of the actor Colin Appleby, who reported hearing the following ditty in Covent Garden days after the referendum: “Rule Britannia / Britannia rules the waves / First we’ll get the Poles out, then the gays” (quoted in Weber 2016). Or the black woman and her daughter who were yelled at to ‘Go home n*****s, we just voted you out!’ (Alake 2016). However, for this group Brexit has not only been experienced as legitimising other people openly (and often aggressively) questioning their rights of residence, but questioning their very identification as British citizens. In short, visible racial, ethnic and religious attributes and markers (or, as experienced within the LGBT community, other apparent markers of ‘difference’) have become reason enough for their national identity and citizenship to be challenged and disparaged.

At stake here is whether fellow citizens deem their citizenship legitimate – i.e. as even belonging to the we – or as conferring equal status as subjects sharing equal rights. Arguably two elements of subjectivity are embedded in this discussion that are relevant to ontological security. First, at an abstract level the ontological security literature generally assumes that a person’s sense of ontological security is intimately bound up with inter-subjectivity and recognition dynamics. A person’s subjectivity is never pre-given, but emerges in interaction with others and is something that needs to be continually claimed, articulated and performed (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, pp. 41-2). The ontological security of individuals, Giddens (1991, pp. 38, 45) argues, is therefore fatefully linked to ‘the appraisals of others’, with positive appraisals central to generating a sense of self-esteem, confidence and ontological security. Positive appraisals, however, are often dependent upon meeting contextually relevant criteria, with individuals failing to meet that criteria at risk of feeling shamed, inadequate, lacking a sense of belonging and home and therefore potentially ontologically insecure (Giddens 1991, pp. 65, 68; Noble 2005, pp. 114-5).

At this point a second set of more historical factors becomes relevant. In this respect, the questioning of various minorities rights of belonging in the context of Brexit cannot be divorced from histories of British colonialism and the British Empire’s racialised treatment of its colonial peoples, not only as the Crown’s subjects, but frequently as lacking full and equal

subjectivity as human beings worthy of equal, fair and respectful treatment. Such anxieties have clearly been apparent after Brexit.

> 'My British children are dual-heritage White British and West African and they all have Yoruba middle names. My British wife and I want them to take pride in both cultures to which they belong. Now I am wondering what prejudice those names may cause on a job application' ("Oportoman" in comments section to Lusher 2016).

The question that arises for minorities is therefore whether they are being viewed likewise by many of their fellow British citizens. While racist groups in British society have always viewed minorities in such terms, the general presumption of recent decades has been that Britain is becoming an increasingly multicultural and cosmopolitan nation. Brexit has been experienced by many as suggesting this was just an illusion. Indeed, during the referendum campaign – almost overwhelming elements of which became focused on issues of immigration[12] – in a manifestation of almost 'postcolonial melancholia' (Gilroy 2005) multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism were expressly targeted as an imposition on an unwilling country by a metropolitan liberal elite. Brexit, for many, was about 'taking our country back', from Brussels, from foreigners and (also often) from minorities – who while legal citizens have increasingly felt that this status was being implicitly challenged.

Foreign Residents (EU nationals)

> *"I live in constant uncertainty and dread. Like many others, I feel like I've invested my entire adulthood into this country… Since 23 June, suddenly I find myself explaining to people that I've never taken a penny in benefits and dread what might happen if someone listens carefully to my accent. It's become OK for people to say things like 'Oh, don't worry, this isn't about you, you're basically British anyway' or 'you're married to a British man, so they're not going to kick you out' as though I should be ashamed of who I am in reality, or hide behind my whiteness, and my ability to speak English well enough to 'pass' if I don't say too much, or if I'm not listened to too carefully. As though being married to a British man could possibly shield me from deportation"*

[12] Infamously, Nigel Farage unveiled a poster depicting a long line of dark skinned refugees and migrants with the slogan 'Breaking Point: the EU has failed us all'. For many this highlighted the racialized and inflammatory nature of the campaign (Stewart and Mason 2016).

> (Sylvie Kilford, Polish, PhD student, quoted in O'Carroll 2016).

The second group of people this article considers is foreign non-nationals resident in the UK, with a particular focus on EU citizens. Unlike British citizens, foreign nationals without citizenship rights were all ineligible to vote in the referendum. This is important as there was considerable prior discussion on whether they should be accorded voting rights. Their disenfranchisement as such signalled society's designation of them as 'different' and not fully 'us'. It is also important because in most cases this involved people who had been resident in the UK for some years (often for decades). These are people who had come to the UK for work, education or family reasons, who had got jobs, established businesses, bought houses, and raised families and had decided to make the UK their home, cultivating their primary community and friendship groups there. In respect of EU citizens, they are also people who, in general, had felt no particular need to apply for British citizenship.

There may be various reasons for this. Some, of course, may never have felt any emotional affinity to Britain. In many cases, it was not necessarily a question of affinity, but rather that they had just never got round to it, since their European citizenship meant this was not a pressing concern. It might also be that as EU citizens they felt that their rights were protected anyway. British citizenship, therefore, would not make any particular material difference to their lives. However, while various rationalist-based explanations like this last one can be posited, this misses more idealistic explanations connected to a particular cosmological (and inherently cosmopolitan) view about the idea of Europe and European identity. This has been evident in many people's reactions following the referendum. To note two:

> 'I see myself as European, perhaps more so than Swedish. The European label and the EU is for me intimately connected due to what it represents and its closeness to the ideals I assume to be connected with the continent. This is perhaps more connected to my ideals than anything else' (Falk 2016).

> 'It's bizarre that it came to this,' said Marius, a 28-year-old from Germany. 'I don't see any benefit, any benefit at all. All the things we believe in, the project of coming together… it's taken a big hit. I don't understand the anger' (Quoted in Williams 2016).

From this standpoint national citizenship is simply less salient than European citizenship as an identity marker. Entailed here are not just questions of identity but a broader cosmological view about the nature and direction of travel of European (geo)politics, one that received a rather abrupt shock when the referendum result was announced and can be seen in the sense of confusion evident in the second quote.

As with other Remainers the referendum result generated a sense of shock and dislocation for many of this group. This seems to have been focused around several deeply interwoven dimensions in which ontological security enhancing practices have been destabilised. Not least, Brexit signified for many EU nationals that (many in) Britain did not want them there any longer and that they should 'go home'. But this raised deep existential anxieties as to what exactly was this 'home' of which the Leavers speak? For many EU nationals Britain *is* home and many expressed that their countries of origin, while home in some national sense, were no longer really home in a personal sense. They were, in short, feeling pressured into returning to places where many now lacked connections, community, housing etc…

> 'Maybe I need a plan B for my life. As hard as it seems, I'm a Londoner. I have no idea what's happening in France. This is home'. (Marie, 26, from France, quoted in Williams 2016).

> 'German, here for 26 years, if things get difficult in London, I'll check out Scotland or otherwise Ireland, Germany is a foreign country to me now and I would only go there if I was old/seriously ill/could not find a job anywhere else'.[13]

> 'I feel a little bit frightened that one day the government is just gonna kick me out of the country and make me go back to Latvia where I don't have any means to exist and don't have home left or people who can support me. This means that to return to Latvia is to me to become homeless there' (Kirils Petrov, Latvian, Divided Kingdom Brexit Documentary 2016).

[13] J.B. Evans comment on the Facebook group *EU immigrant Brexit survival*, 27 June 2016, https://www.facebook.com/groups/540396686153880/?ref=notif¬if_t=group_r2j_approved¬if_id=1480325462119132

For some EU nationals, therefore, Brexit has fundamentally challenged the concept of home, with this placing them psychologically in a heightened sense of uncertainty and anxiety. Interestingly, however, for other foreign nationals Brexit has generated a different response, with their sense of non-British nationhood actually growing stronger as they reconnect with a different national home in order to re-establish markers of certainty and safety.[14]

Anxieties about losing 'home', however, are experienced in the raw and very directly. Multiple examples exist of EU citizens (including children) being aggressively confronted and told 'to go home'. One Polish man was even killed following an assault apparently motivated by nothing more than a group of youths overhearing him speaking Polish (Quinn 2016).[15] In the Cambridgeshire town of Huntingdon, for instance, laminated cards stating "Leave the EU. No more Polish vermin" were distributed the morning after the vote (Lusher 2016). As one 35-year-old Polish woman noted, 'Last week, a man at work called me a f***ing foreigner, made comments about foreigners taking benefits. Before the referendum, people tried to be nice, tried not to let it show. Now, some of them don't even try. You see it in their faces' (quoted in Lusher 2016). As a French EU national noted, 'These people have no idea of the psychological harm they have inflicted upon us' ("Vive Laz Republique" in comments section to Younge 2016).

Central to the anxieties generated in such interactions is obviously a loss of acceptance, a sense of rejection, and perhaps even more destabilising, a loss of social trust in one's immediate neighbours and community. People therefore report walking down the street 'looking at people and thinking: "Was it you who voted out? Was it you who voted out? Was it you who voted out…' (quoted in Younge 2016). Suspicious and nervous of those closest around her, Linda, a 36 year old who came to the UK from the Czech Republic sixteen years ago, expressed that she wanted 'to see everybody's vote on them' branded like a tattoo (Williams 2016). There are clearly elements of a 'shaming strategy' (Steele 2005) evident in this last sentiment, of trying to get people to visibly confront what they have done. However,

[14] "Interestingly, I am feeling more French than ever since the referendum" (Charles Noblet quoted in O'Carroll 2016).

[15] Whether or not the motive was Brexit related, the important point is that this is how it was widely perceived across society, thereby further enhancing the anxieties of foreign nationals.

this desire to be able to explicitly identify who is to blame also resonates with wanting to know who has betrayed you in your community and around whom you might feel nervous or safe. Of course, the fact that some Leave voters have seen Brexit as legitimating open hostility towards foreigners suggests they have no problem with being openly identifiable and feel no shame.

Frightened and anxious, however, many EU nationals report changing their everyday routines. As reported by one Polish woman, her and her partner have started doing their shopping in neighbouring towns, instead of their home town of Boston, the place which recorded the highest percentage leave vote (75%). Her anxieties are plain: 'you can't ask your husband one question in your own language, because someone will look at you like: "I want to kill you"' (quoted in Lusher 2016). Others report changing their normal patterns of social communication, including trying to talk 'as little as possible, so the British people will not notice my accent' (Divided Kingdom Brexit Documentary 2016; O'Carroll 2016), or refusing to speak with people they previously regarded as friends.

Unlike British nationals from minority groups the anxieties of EU foreign nationals are not connected to whether or not one is viewed as a (full) British citizen, but rather to whether one's EU citizenship is any longer accorded the same level of respect and equality it was prior to the referendum. In practical terms, however, the above discussion has also pointed to notable similarities, not least regarding anxieties about home and belonging and whether one is any longer deemed to be a subject (a human) of equal worth and value. Insofar as EU foreign nationals find themselves depicted as vermin then this is clearly in question.

This last point is interesting because there is also evidence of some EU nationals drawing distinctions within and between different members of this group as a form of diversionary tactics and ontological security enhancement. Rather than rejecting the stigmatisations frequently assigned to immigrants in debates over Brexit, they side with them, but emphasise that they do not apply to them personally. For example, as stated by one Polish resident in Bradford, 'I don't like when Polish people get benefits, they're not working. I came here for work, I'm working hard to get this money, it's not like I'm cheating or something' (MyBradford.org 2016). Likewise, it is also possible to identify a tendency amongst more

educated European citizens, particularly those studying in the UK or with professional jobs, of distinguishing themselves from those in search of more menial labour. In this it is therefore possible to see the transposing of anxieties about their own belonging in the UK (now being questioned by Brexit) onto a blaming/securitisation of other European citizens deemed to be the (justified) cause of resentment amongst the British population. Such an attempt to deflect criticism and approbation therefore seeks to close the gap with British citizens by emphasising we are good and worthy too, while opening a gap of stigmatisation with other EU nationals.[16]

Conclusion

The article has focused on showing how the Brexit referendum result for Britain to leave the EU has been a cause of considerable anxiety and ontological insecurity for Remain supporters. Before drawing some general conclusions it is important to recognise that this offers just one side of the story. If the referendum result has been a considerable source of ontological insecurity for some, for many others – and certainly for many Brexiteers – it has been experienced as deeply ontologically affirming, at least in the short-term. Indeed, one of the most notable things about the referendum is how a single vote became the focus of such significant levels of anguish and aspiration on all sides. For many Leavers the vote has been a valedictory and cathartic experience, one signifying their reclaiming of a sense of subjectivity they have long felt denied to them. Many subsequent expressions of this have certainly been crude, distasteful and often cruel, but claims to regain sovereignty, to take back control of the country's borders, and openly expressed (and often racist) desires for immigrants to be sent packing, can themselves be seen as a backlash built upon the often precarious and alienating experiences that many people voting Leave experience in their everyday lives (Mckenzie 2017).[17] In this respect, the idea that Brexit signified the masses rising up against the metropolitan liberal ruling elite, though a simplification, does capture core elements of

[16] Thanks to Aiste Jotautyte for highlighting this dynamic.
[17] Although in actuality Leave voters were more likely to be middle class than poor (Bhambra 2017, p. 217). Whether such people *felt* they were poor – in light of British politicians' frequent appeals to the 'strivers' and the 'just managing' – is an interesting question.

prevailing sentiment. Of course, whether Brexit will offer a longer-term source of ontological security for many of these people is open to question.

In contrast, of course, this article has focused (mainly) on the experiences of Remain supporters. Drawing on the literature on ontological security it first noted that existential anxieties can take different forms, distinguishing between anxieties of fate and death, emptiness and meaninglessness and of guilt and condemnation. It then outlined several processes and mechanisms through which individuals typically seek to enhance or preserve a sense of ontological security. These included the need: to develop consistent and stable biographical narratives of self-identity; to develop routinized patterns of everyday behaviour that serve to re-inscribe those self-narratives; to vicariously identify with broader communities; to establish a place of sanctuary and safety called 'home'; to avoid behaviours and accusations that can generate a sense of shame and moral self-approbation; and finally, the tendency to transpose anxieties about the unknown onto identifiable objects of fear and blame around which new narratives of social order can be developed.

The following analysis then argued that the Brexit referendum and its aftermath have generated slightly different sorts of ontological anxieties for different groups of Remainers. Although the analysis obviously provides a simplified and flattened out account, ontological anxieties around Brexit do seem to have different manifestations and tones. For instance, for British citizens who voted remain, Brexit was experienced by many as a form of bereavement at the loss it signified of core elements of self-identity and fundamental values. This has been accompanied by a sense of embarrassment and shame at what Britain is seen to have done to Europe, but also a deep sense of betrayal targeted at Leave voters who are seen as seeking to fundamentally transform the nature of Britain and Britishness. In this respect, Brexit has challenged established cosmological systems of meaning regarding what Britain is and what its place and role in the world should be, while simultaneously activating anxieties of guilt and condemnation. However, it was also noted that British citizens from minority backgrounds have sometimes experienced a slightly different set of anxieties, with the rise of racist anti-immigrant sentiment raising fundamental concerns about their very status as British citizens and that become manifest in anxieties as to whether one is even recognised as an equal worthy of belonging.

In contrast, for EU nationals ontological anxieties have emerged for slightly different reasons. While many also felt challenged at the cosmological level in terms of Brexit challenging established systems of meaning about the nature of Europe and the direction of European history, unlike British citizens they did not stand to lose their European citizenship or sense of identity – indeed, this rather seems to have been reaffirmed. Rather, at stake for them has been the question of the status of European citizenship in a post-Brexit referendum world, and where being a European resident has become increasingly stigmatised and a source of resentment. In all cases, however, ontological anxieties generated by Brexit have also been manifest in the disruption of existing routines and patterns of everyday behaviour and their replacement with new routines, with new narratives of self-identity being carved out, often premised on securitising moves that have sought to re-inscribe a new sense of order onto what is perceived to be a chaotic situation.

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