

Revisioning psychology and deglobalisation: The case of Brexit

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Abstract

This article approaches the theme of the psychology of de/globalisation by taking up the example of Brexit as an historical conjuncture that hinges upon troublesome questions of sovereignty. Operating at the interface between history and psychology, and informed by liminality scholarship, the paper offers a broad genealogical sketch of three mutations in the semantics of sovereignty as a mode of power that implicates subjectivity. Theological (premodern), nationalist (modern), and neoliberal/economic (postmodern) variants share the mythical motif of absolute autonomy. An account of globalisation as the spatial spread of the events of an initially partial process across the whole of a global field offers a view of the psychological as a subjective field of intelligibility shaped by societal and political settings. Drawing upon data from a focus group study conducted just before the 2016 referendum, attention is given to the resurgence of the theme of sovereignty amongst ordinary people.

Keywords

Brexit, (de)globalisation, neoliberalism, sovereignty, subjectivity

An early critical popular cultural expression about “globalisation” is a song from the 1983 album *Infidels* where Bob Dylan protests that his possessions are no longer U.S. made (“This shirt I wear comes from the Philippines, and the car I drive is a Chevrolet, it was put together down in Argentina by a guy making 30 cents a day”; 1983, 0:26). The song warned that the country Dylan knew and loved was transforming into something alien and unstable. “Democracy don’t rule the world,” (4:03) but instead violence and capitalism: “Capitalism is above the law, it says it don’t count unless it sells, If it cost too

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much to build it at home, just build it cheaper some place else” (2:23). Its title (“Union Sundown”) evokes a sense of a country on the brink of being torn apart by its own greed. It gives conscious subjective (U.S.-1980s-centred) expression to the de-stabilising and de-territorialising effects of what today would be called “globalisation.” To the extent that it urges a progressive critique of capitalism, the song can be taken as an early pop-cultural expression of the form of mentality that Teo (2023) calls “antiglobalizing subjectivity” (a progressive call for international solidarity and more equitable relations in the face of globalised capitalism). But perhaps it also shades into the protectionist nationalism that Teo calls “deglobalizing subjectivity” (a regressive nationalist solidarity based on a celebration of “sovereignty” with its exclusionary hostility and a denial of relations). After all, in 1985, Bob Dylan was accused of disrespecting the spirit of the *Live Aid* gig for Ethiopian famine relief by suggesting that some of the proceeds be spent relieving the debts U.S. family farmers owe to the banks (Jones, 2005).

This article connects Teo’s (2023) account of mentality to a liminality–theoretical account of psychology (Stenner, 2017). Teo’s useful distinction between de- and antiglobalising subjectivity should not be taken as an either/or category. Rather, this paper suggests that during liminal occasions—when a prior form of order remains suspended whilst a new form has not yet taken its place—both options can hover as equipotential possibilities of a becoming yet to crystallise (see Andreouli et al., 2019), or a “fluid conjuncture” (Dobry, 2009). Accepting the reality of a liminal phase makes it possible to affirm that Dylan’s song (1983) is an expression both of deglobalising subjectivity and of antiglobalising subjectivity whilst at the same time being neither one nor the other (Greco & Stenner, 2017; see also Gao, 2023). The either/or logic has not yet hardened and the question of if and how it is resolved is one that is thoroughly psychosocial (Kofeod & Stenner, 2017; Motzkau & Clinch, 2017). Theorising the psychological dimension of globalisation demands consideration of liminal circumstance and of the manner and extent to which people’s integration into the ebbs and flows of global networks finds expression in the subjective “fields of intelligibility” of their worldviews (Szakolczai, 2003).

This article takes up the theme of the psychology of de/globalisation by examining one specific aspect of the phenomenon of “Brexit” (the UK decision, based on a 2016 referendum, to leave the EU). Considered as what Stuart Hall called a “conjuncture” (see Clarke & Newman, 2019), the paper focuses on how sense-making around Brexit was characterised by the reemergence of troublesome questions of sovereignty that are now globally relevant. The concept of sovereignty is a well-understood technical concept in the field of international relations (see Mälksoo, 2012), but Davies’ (2021) argument about the post-2008 “revenge of sovereignty on government” (p. 97) opens up unexpected complexities, the grasping of which requires new historical and psychological sensibilities: “In Agamben’s terms, we are witnessing a move against ‘vicarious’ logics of power in favour of direct, unmediated and patriarchal forms of power, or pure sovereignist decision” (Davies, 2021, p. 98).

Theoretically speaking, the concept of sovereignty (what is “sovereign” has absolute power to decide over a territory) is tightly connected to the metaphysical notion of “substance,” both being defined as absolute unities that are the source of their own intelligibility because they depend upon nothing but themselves for their own existence. Like

“substance,” it poses as an unchallengeable absolute when really it entails a denial of real internal relations and processes and a mythologising of self-contained autonomy (see Cassirer, 1946). More practically, the notion of liminality is relevant because at the heart of the matter is the relationship to boundaries (DeCaroli, 2007; Mälksoo, 2012). When political subjectivity is captivated by sovereignty, it encourages a hardening of boundaries into hostile *limes* (the name of Roman boundary fortifications) rather than the fluid, open, and interpenetrating threshold of a *limen* (the liminal as fluid source of living becoming). Although an essentially contested notion, the sovereignty theme therefore brings a renewed concern with questions of fixed borders, insiders and outsiders, authority and obedience, and the absolute power to decide regardless of prior norms and laws. Sovereignty concerns the assertion of obedient loyalty within a specified field. In Foucault’s (2007, p. 107) terms, sovereignty coexists as a mode of power with “discipline” and “government” (or “security”) but its features (e.g., of territory, restraint of movement, excess, the transformation of population into people, and performative/spectacular self-assertion) become particularly evident when government-as-usual recedes because it is held in suspense or fails to operate (Davies, 2021).

A tradition of thought from Bodin (1576) through Hobbes to Schmitt, Arendt, Foucault, and Agamben shows why sovereignty exceeds the technical definition it is often given in political science and international relations: within the bounded field of a given jurisdiction, who has absolute decision-making authority and why? Answers to questions of sovereignty typically arise during crises and are distinctively liminal in the sense that they are emergent, ambivalent, mixed, unstable, exceptional, and somewhat mythical (Stenner, 2017). This is because the issue of sovereignty arises precisely when the relationship between authority (ruler), obedience (ruled), and territory (jurisdiction) has become a problem and is called into question. Sovereignty evades simple definition because it is not a “thing,” but a psychosocial space/time of problematisation: a relation between ruler and ruled that has become problematic.¹

As we will investigate further below using focus group data building on research by Andreouli et al. (2019), during Brexit, the heated theme of sovereignty arose somewhat negatively as a potency of territorial control that has been lost or stolen or given away and that must be reclaimed. When the theme of sovereignty arises under liminal conditions, the exceptional becomes the rule (see Calarco & DeCaroli, 2007). Legal and political rationalities and forms of intelligibility that would be accepted under normal conditions are suspended and replaced by basic and even archaic questions concerning absolute authority to decide who belongs within the territorial borders and who does not (see Khawaja et al., 2023).

The exit of the UK from the EU contributed to a broader globalising liminal turning point during which established subjective fields of intelligibility underwent significant challenge and mutation. To the extent that sovereignty implies a mythical self-contained autonomy proper to a territory, Brexit involved an expression of “deglobalisation,” but—as a liminal phenomenon—it remains ambiguously betwixt expressions of deglobalising, antiglobalising or globalising subjectivity. But how are we using “globalisation”?

Three decades of “globalisation studies” amply reveal a protean concept with multiple meanings (Chiu & Kwan, 2016; Diaz & Zirkel, 2012; Yang et al., 2011) demanding careful theorisation (see Prilleltensky, 2012). We theorise globalisation in process

theoretical terms (see Stenner, 2022b) as the spread of the events of an initially partial process across the whole of a global field. Two simple examples of globally spreading processes are the spread of human beings from Africa to inhabit all continents about 12,000 years ago and the spread of viral infection across the global human population during the COVID-19 pandemic. Real complexities immediately arise when the interdependencies between different fields are recognised. For instance, the events of viral reproduction that spread across a global field of human bodies (i.e., a pandemic) obviously cannot occur without the preexisting field of a globalised and interconnected human population. From this perspective, the notion of connectivity (Tellmann et al., 2012) is crucial, first because fields arise through the connectivity of the event-type that composes them, and second because different fields connect in relations of mutual presupposition.

Responses to COVID-19 brought into sharp relief the more recent and currently dominant use of “globalisation” to refer to current world society as the dense togetherness of multiple, mutually presupposing, and mediated globalised fields. Global lockdown starkly highlighted this colossal complexity by interrupting and transforming the interwoven web of globalised processes upon which contemporary forms of human life now depend. It is this recent use of globalisation as world-society that Bandura (2001) assumes when he writes of the “new era” of globalised “human interconnectedness” that began sometime in the late 20th century, now in crisis. Mentality, from this perspective, is likewise a psychological field of intelligibility integrated within this wider nexus of fields (see Stenner, 2022a).

Globalisation in broad historical perspective: Premodern, modern, and postmodern modalities of sovereignty

Today’s conflicted and contested global society builds upon older formations directly connected to nationalism (see Billig, 2023) and particularly to the modern empire-building European nation states of the Atlantic seaboard that began flourishing in the second part of the 16th century, the British Empire becoming the largest. Influenced by key “early modern” events like Columbus’s voyage (1492), a “global world” was initially constructed between 1400 and 1800 (Subrahmanyam, 2017). From 1545, the worldwide processes of trade, circulation, colonial exploitation, and conquest that undergirded West European colonial dominance were well-established (Andrews, 2021).²

The modern concept of sovereignty is typically dated to the *Peace of Westphalia* (1648)—the two peace treaties of which settled two European wars of religion that had decimated Europe. It established a new system of “sovereign” nation states fundamental to modern international relations. This notion of sovereignty assumes a self-contained entity that depends upon nothing but itself for its own existence. A nation state that this system legally recognises as sovereign is to be treated as an autonomous unity with exclusive power over affairs that fall within its territory. Sovereignty is thus an idea that is fundamentally connected to the exercise of power both within a territory and between territories. But the very nations (like Spain, Portugal, France, Denmark, the Dutch Republic, and England) that bestowed this modern sovereignty upon themselves and

each other were meanwhile engaged in ruthless and violent overseas expansion. Clearly the Africans, Indians, Native Americans, and Spice Islanders colonised and exploited by the English between 1575 and 1675 were not granted sovereignty over their own territories but were instead captured by and for the benefit of English sovereignty.³

The modern concept of sovereignty has older theological roots (Schmitt, 1922/2005), consideration of which sheds light on the transformation from the premodern to the modern period. In the dozen or so empires and major states existing across the world in the 16th century, the most general and global worldview was provided by religion (the largest being Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity). Sovereignty's source as a fundamental psychopolitical notion is "premodern" and theological. In Christianity-dominated premodern Europe, sovereignty implied the sacred power of the anointed (Christ means "the anointed by God" and only God depends upon nothing but itself for its own existence). In medieval Christendom, for example, the religious system was a "larger universe" aspiring to globality and providing an infrastructure uniting whilst exceeding any nation. Indeed, the initial identity of England was established by the 6th-century phase of Christianisation.

The European shift from feudalism involved a mutation in the semantics of sovereignty. The religious worldview was increasingly challenged and modified yet the authority of its sovereign metaphysics (of a self-contained all-powerful decision-making substance) was carried over to the post-Westphalian nation state in secularised form. Following the plague⁴ and the Reformation, Christianity had transformed from being perceived as a solution to disorder to becoming one of its primary sources. By the 17th century, Europe was decimated by religious warfare. New worldviews and arguments for political legitimation were sought and discovered within the powerful new discourse of natural philosophy, stimulating new conceptions of natural right fundamental to the modern nation state (see Stenner, 2004, on Hobbes' "Newtonian" concept of natural right as a source of modern psychology and Goldstone, 2017, on its influence on Montesquieu and Jefferson).

This modern "naturalisation" of theological sovereignty as nationalistic sovereignty (ideally grounded in natural rights and the "will of the people") was led by those nations powerful enough to benefit from globalisation. The English, American, and French revolutions were the most famous political expressions of the "modern" shift. The political vocation of religion was radically limited and the conception of a potentially global humanity unified by a religion or integrating different religions into a universal religious worldview, was eclipsed by a phase in which each nation state fostered a perception of itself as a competitive totality unto itself. Each God-like national "Leviathan" considered itself the "good whole" licensed to battle other comparable nations and to "civilise" and "modernise" those considered less developed (i.e., to ruthlessly exploit them). During this phase, globalising forces were in fact unfolding in a massively accelerated way (especially under industrial capitalism, led by Britain), but these forces were perceived and understood through mentalities of sovereignty informed by a semantics of nationalism.

Expert and ordinary worldviews were profoundly influenced by assumptions prevalent in this nationalist sovereignty framework. Arnold Toynbee was among the first to point out how the subjective worldviews of modern historians were shaped and "stamped"

by the nation state context. In a project that began in 1927 (long predating Beck, 1992), Toynbee (1972) questioned “the recent Western practice of making all history culminate in the Western inquirer’s own country in his own time,” declaring it a “nationalistic hallucination” (p. 52). From its mid 19th-century formation, the field of intelligibility of the discipline of psychology was comparably distorted by the belief that “races” had evolved with different psychological attributes, forming a natural hierarchy culminating in white Northern Europeans (see Richards & Stenner, 2022). The sovereignty myth encouraged a view of the nation as a natural, self-contained, and autonomous entity whose greatness results from the (varied) natural calibre of a population that naturally belongs within its naturalised territorial boundaries. As “progress” became the new *leitmotiv* of a European Enlightenment turning ever more to natural science for its inspiration, a “modern” world-view arose whereby nations attributed their advances to constitutional ethnic calibre. John Locke’s influential arguments about natural right are important in this genealogy, especially when their relevance to colonised land and peoples is not ignored (see Arneil, 1992). For example, the displacement of Indigenous people during British settlement of North America could be justified on the grounds that hunter gatherers, unlike the farmer settlers, have no natural right to the land they have nomadically traversed for generations. The “new” land could be brought under extended British sovereignty. The colonisation of African peoples by European powers could likewise be justified on the racial grounds that the Indigenous people lacked the capacity for sovereign psychological agency necessary for the organisation of a modern sovereign polity. Kant himself had warned his reader against the “prejudice” of not taking “race” seriously, and his world-view of human progress embodied white supremacism (Hund, 2011).

Toynbee’s (1954) original but neglected meaning of “postmodern age” (published in Volume 8 of his *A Study of History*) is helpful for understanding the 20th-century orientation to globalisation and its relation to neoliberalism. For Toynbee, *modernity* culminated in the combination of industrialism and nationalism that worked together in the building up of “Great Powers.” Toynbee argues that this European state-centred modernity reached its high-water mark in the third quarter of the 19th century, after which serious tensions were becoming evident between the political dimension of nationalism and the economic dimension of industrial capitalism. The global scale of industrial production and consumption had long transcended the bounds of national territory, and these two forces began to pull apart. To simplify Toynbee’s argument: the formation of ever more nations evidently lacking “sovereign” self-sufficiency undermined the *Westphalia* principle of the nation as a natural, fully independent sovereign agency; the dominance of the bourgeoisie was challenged by a rising industrial working class of international scope; and non-Western powers like Meiji Japan, Bolshevik Russia, Kemalist Turkey, and Maoist China were asserting themselves industrially in novel political forms antagonistic to the West. Each of these features intensified and accelerated during the 20th century.

For several centuries, the historical tide in the West had flowed towards the mythical ideal of nations as economically, politically, and culturally “sovereign” powers, the “dominant note of their consciousness” being “an aspiration to be universes in themselves” (Toynbee, 1972, p. 38). In the closing decades of the 19th century, the tide began turning in the other direction, beginning a postmodern scenario in which “the dominant note in the

corporate consciousness of communities is a sense of being parts of some larger universe” (Toynbee, 1972, p. 38). The new value accruing to co-ordinated “globalisation” became obvious after the First World War as the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires broke up. The Soviet Union formed out of the destruction of the Russian Empire and oriented itself internationally in terms of a global ideal of communism. After the war, Prussian Germany formed its first democracy in the shape of the Weimar Republic, but by the end of the 1920s, its leading figures considered the state form unviable. With Hitler at the sovereign helm, Germany mutated into an industrial war machine animated by a virulent expansionist nationalism. The Paris Peace Conference that ended the war was also the inaugural event of the League of Nations, a novel intergovernmental organisation. Beyond the fog of the old nationalistic hallucination arose a new demand for imagining and enacting cosmopolitan and international ideals and practices, giving new visibility and value to the theme of globalisation. But the urgency to rearticulate agreed principles for global international co-ordination beyond sovereignty was stalled after the end of the Second World War. With the arrival of the Cold War, a fragile global peace was maintained not by principle, but by fear of global atomic annihilation.

Cosmopolitan and internationalist ideals aside, the Western powers, now led by the USA, put particular emphasis on a narrowly economic globalisation. We suggest that the notion of “sovereignty” morphed again and was bestowed upon a financial market presumed to have its own logic and to “know best.” The interwar period saw the birth of neoliberalism with its new economic philosophy grounded in decentralisation and suspicion of the state, preventing inflation using monetary policy, and its preoccupation with a “re-formatting of individual subjectivity” (Davies & Gane, 2021, p. 3; see Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2007). Both Davies (2021) and Slobodian (2018) have highlighted the neoliberal ideal whereby sovereignty lies outside of national politics and within the price system of a naturalised and sublime global economy. Friedrich Hayek (1960)—perhaps the leading exponent of neoliberal economics—was motivated to counteract the forces that led to the pointless massacre of the First World War. Arriving at the London School of Economics in 1931 and quickly becoming involved with the Chicago School, Hayek ascribed a quasinalistic autonomy to economic processes (whose complexity must be respected rather than crudely interfered with). Equally opposed to the statist interventions of communism and nationalism, Hayek’s vision can be considered a new rendering of sovereignty as the sovereign freedom of the market viewed as a natural “spontaneous force” (Hayek, 1960, pp. 348–350). The state is urged either not to interfere with the market’s sovereignty (a negative freedom) or to work positively in the service of a freed market. The co-ordination of human effort should be summoned and fostered by economic competition rather than nationalist or leftist/internationalist fervour. Hayek’s neoliberalist policy recommendations included a project for the denationalisation of money (see Ingham, 2020) as part of a “new form of internationalism based not on workers’ rights or solidarity but the frictionless movement of capital and labour across national borders” (Davies & Gane, 2021, p. 7).

The practical implementation of this vision happened only after the further trauma of the Second World War, accompanied by the break-up of the British, Dutch, and French colonial Empires, the establishment of the United Nations and other new agencies of international governance (e.g., the beginnings of a global human rights regime), and the

Cold War. It was after the collapse of the Soviet Union that *neoliberalism* was trumpeted, especially by long-dominant nations like the USA and UK, as the political rationality providing ideological grounding to the politics of late globalised capitalism (Brown, 2015). The enigmatic notion of sovereignty applied now to the economy construed as a natural source of freedom which society must henceforth rely upon to “decide” its future well-being. But this “optimism” was short-lived. The damaging side effects generated by narrowly economic globalisation (prominently illustrated by the global financial crisis of 2008) were a key factor leading to the *global crisis of globalisation* we are now concerned with. Religion has been forcefully reasserted as a principle of sovereignty and battles about nationalistic sovereignty rage ever more furiously. A brutal case in point is the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine in which—reflecting a long-established emphasis on ethnic and linguistic forms of national sovereignty in Eastern Europe—the concept of sovereignty has been a pivotal concept on both sides.

The Brexit conjuncture: The economic sovereignty of neoliberal globalisation reaching its limits

Brexit can be viewed against this background of a global crisis of globalisation. Some have attributed the largely unanticipated vote for Brexit as a protest vote by citizens who are perceived as losers of globalisation, left behind by consecutive British governments over the past decades (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). Certainly, the referendum indicated a divide between younger, more educated, socially liberal, and urban voters and older, more conservative, less educated, and less urban voters (Hobolt, 2016) and many *leave* voters in the UK were indeed concentrated in the less affluent, de-industrialised areas of England and Wales (Scotland and Northern Ireland had *remain* majorities). But this narrative (“revolt of the white working class disempowered by globalisation”) should not obscure the less newsworthy fact that the *leave* vote was mostly carried by middle class voters (Dorling, 2016). As we write, it is plausible that the “will of the people” announced in Brexit supports a longer-standing right-wing project to further deregulate the economy and erode social provisions and workers’ rights in the name of promoting an agile “UK plc” better able to exploit flows of global capital unlocked by crises.

Chronic disaffection with the political establishment was successfully captured by the *leave* campaign’s “take back control” slogan which, serving as a call to action, “successfully voiced these sensibilities – of being ignored, of being abandoned, of loss – and found a potent articulatory principle through which such feelings might find redress” (Clarke & Newman, 2017, p. 108). The rhetoric squarely blamed the EU for the negative impacts of globalisation (despite the EU’s self-image as protecting its member states from these impacts) and imagined the possibility—technically mediated by the device of a referendum—of recentring the nation as the ultimate political authority, thus bringing questions of the nation-state and its sacred sovereignty back to centre stage within “common-sense” discourse.

Gerbaudo (2021) describes sovereignty as a “master signifier” that features centrally in both regressive politics (the border controls and invasions characteristic of “territorial sovereignty,” which seeks to conserve the nation ethno-culturally) and progressive

politics (in the form of “democratic sovereignty,” e.g., calls for more meaningful citizen participation in governance, e.g., by reversing the course of economic deregulation). In Gerbaudo’s analysis, sovereignty becomes an “axis of emergence” (Andreouli et al., 2019) which marks the transition from an era dominated by neoliberalism to an era of neo-statism, facilitated by the antiglobalisation movements of the 2010s following the global financial crisis. Whilst this remains to be seen, it is clear that sovereignty is newly problematised in the Brexit conjuncture.

Brexit turning on the axis of “sovereignty”

To add qualitative “flesh” to the theoretical discussion above, this final section draws selectively upon data extracts from nine focus groups conducted in different parts of England just before the referendum with 38 participants of diverse social and political backgrounds, including pro- and anti-Brexit views (for a description of sampling, data collection, and ethics approval, see Andreouli, 2019; Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018). We focus specifically on the theme of sovereignty, which was very prominent in our initial thematic analysis. Predominantly in Eurosceptic accounts, sovereignty was structured around three key themes: political sovereignty, legislative sovereignty, and cultural/identitarian sovereignty. An example of political sovereignty comes from a *leave* supporter from a mixed group from the South:

There’s two ways of looking at it, isn’t there? Because like, if you can influence a large group of people because they’re under one rule, if you’re influencing them positively, there’s positives. But if you’re influencing them negatively in the same way, it’s negative. So, it depends on the leadership, if the EU leadership we can trust. But it’s not very publicised, is it? All of us are like these people that aren’t voted for, and that’s all you really hear. You see a big room of people, we don’t know who they are, we don’t really know what they’re voting on, we don’t really know what decisions are made.

Sovereignty in the above extract means that a democratically elected and accountable government has authoritative control over a national territory. It is implied that democracy itself is dependent upon this kind of political sovereignty, which binds together the nation and the state into a coherent whole. The participant raises concerns about the EU’s so-called democratic deficit. According to this account, the EU exercises a somewhat cryptic form of governance which challenges the basis of democracy by operating without proper public scrutiny or citizen participation. The EU encapsulates a felt crisis of democracy in the current conjuncture. This “critical moment” opens up the space for revising foundational questions of authority and sovereignty—issues that previously appeared settled.

This unravelling of sovereignty is also highlighted in the following extract, which foregrounds an erosion of legal sovereignty by “cosmopolitan elites.” The extract comes from a North London *leave* supporting group:

We make a law, we pass it, we send it to Brussels, they look at it, “No you can’t have that.” Can you imagine the Americans passing a law in Washington, sending it down to Guatemala, Guatemala saying, “No, you can’t have that.” It wouldn’t happen over there. But we’re stupid.

The UK is presented as having illegitimately gifted decision-making powers to “Brussels,” disrupting the fundamental alignment between a national state and its people. This account aims to persuade by means of an exaggerated analogy: having UK law decided by the EU is as absurd as expecting the USA to grant such power to Guatemala. The metonym “Brussels” is widely used in the UK public imaginary to objectify concerns around the EU’s democratic accountability and technocratic governance. The legitimate passing of laws is to be the unique concern of the independent nation-state and any exception to this natural field of intelligibility shows up as simply foolish (see Billig, 1995).

Sovereignty was also constructed in cultural and identitarian terms in some pro-EU and Brexit-supporting accounts. Our data showed many instances where this aspect of sovereignty was foregrounded in anti-immigration accounts against EU membership, as has been well-documented in the wider literature on Brexit attitudes (e.g., Curtice, 2016). The extract below from the same group exemplifies such a culturally framed argument for national sovereignty (see also Andreouli, 2019):

P2: I dislike all their little laws on this and how their court is the ultimate thing, where I think that our High Court should be—

Interviewer: Oh, like the Court of Human Rights?

P2: Yeah. And you know, you get the odd—

P1: And straight banana, and straight cucumbers and silly things like this.

P2: Yeah. We’ve got to have this like that. Everything’s got to be measured in kilos now down in the butchers. And yet we all go, if we all said to each other, “What do you weigh?” And we went, “Ah, such-and-such kilos,” they’d go, “What’s that in English? What was it (inaudible)?” And if I went, “Oh, twelve stone,” they’d go, “Right, yeah, lovely, know exactly what you mean.”

...

P2: And I don’t like that because these are the traditional things of England or Great Britain, you know, they’re just gradually eroding it away. And that doesn’t help via them bringing in law. (Andreouli, 2019, pp. 252–253)

In this extract, “globalising” structures (international law and trade standards) extending beyond the nation are viewed purely negatively as lost sovereignty, both in terms of Britain’s political independence and global standing as well as in terms of its unique identity and tradition. The EU is portrayed as a detestable threat to the cultural integrity of the UK. Such widespread claims made about EU law do not correspond to actual facts, but have become an integral part of the broader Eurosceptic symbolic landscape in the UK. This explicit reference to Britain’s imperial legacy illustrates the affective investment attached to leaving the EU and is indicative of what Gilroy (2005) refers to as “imperial nostalgia” (see Andreouli, 2019, for further analysis of the imperial echoes of lay Brexit imagery).

By contrast, in some EU-supporting accounts, dispersed decision-making across different centres of decision-making was preferable to national sovereignty. An international framework can integrate shared values, giving people rights that prevent nations from abusing their citizens (examples given included human rights, antidiscrimination laws, and labour rights). Without disregarding their inherent ambivalence and dialectics (cf. Billig, 1987), it can be argued that these participant accounts sought to maintain a nonliminal, somewhat settled state of affairs whereby questions of sovereignty and territorial control are not problematised nor do they need fixing. The extract below comes from one of our younger, more educated, and London-based focus groups that strongly supported *remain*:

P1: There's like, I guess, like the European Convention on Human Rights, and the European Court of Human Rights, and I mean, I personally think it's fabulous, and its judgements are brilliant. It's kind of like, I see it as a kind of collective better wisdom that can override the discrimination of certain countries. So some of the cases like, for example, the UK had with not wanting to allow gay people in the Army—even though I'm not a big fan of the Army, obviously—but discrimination against gay people—and they were saying that you know, using religious arguments, and that it would be too much of a distraction for the other men, and it took it going all the way to the European Court of Human Rights to kind of overrule it and say, “No, you are being ridiculous,” you know, and not allowing countries to discriminate like that, by having this kind of overarching sensibility and more sensible decisions (laughing), so countries can't just get away with discriminatory things.

P2: Yes, so in that vein, similarly would say, for me, like—I feel safer being a part of Europe, because I feel like it balances—well, not just us, but all countries, it's a balance, and whatever extreme perspective you're going to invite, it's going to balance from all political perspectives. (Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018, p. 1328)

In this extract, the EU shields against discrimination from nation-states which can turn undemocratic and authoritarian. Contrary to the previous extracts, here, national sovereignty is not at all taken as an unquestionable ideal. Instead, to avoid misuse, the state's political power must be checked, controlled, and decentralised. The implication is that absolute sovereignty over a territory comes dangerously close to authoritarianism and is the “dark” side of sovereignty, which corrodes democracy and freedom.

In many *remain*-supporting accounts, national sovereignty, although perhaps desirable, was simply impossible in the globalised world. The best that the UK can hope for is a more managed type of power share whereby some power lies with the EU and some stays within the nation-state. As one “pragmatic *remainder*” from a London focus group put it:

P1: They say, “Well we'll be able to be in the single market.” But my argument to that is, you say we can go it alone and be independent and then still trade with the EU, but Norway does that, as does Switzerland. But they still have to comply to all the EU directives and have no influence on them. So why would you want to sign up to that when you've got no influence and you still have to jump through hoops?

[. . .]

P2: And yet [anonymised], you're wanting to stay in it so how do we avoid having a [supranational/European] state?

P1: We have our veto; we have to protect our veto.

P2: Yes, we've got to keep up on that.

P1: I think we're in a much better place since the renegotiation [the then PM David Cameron's renegotiation about the UK's membership in the EU prior to the referendum], although it wasn't exactly. . . . It was quite successful, but it wasn't as successful as many had hoped. But I think he got a lot.

In this extract, sovereignty is clearly problematised. But instead of seeking a return to a romanticised ideal of sovereign Britain or raising the alarm about the “dark side” of sovereignty, as in the previous extracts, the tension is, at least temporarily, resolved through a pragmatic split of national sovereignty that allows the nation-state to keep some elements of authoritative control while relinquishing others: the UK state should maintain its sovereignty over political decisions, but solely economic matters may be left to operate under supranational regulation. This is presented as a pragmatic solution because, whilst desirable in principle, sovereign control over how a nation organises its trade is practically unattainable because nation-states have no choice but to participate in international trade deals. In contrast, the participant suggests that political sovereignty, in the sense of having sovereign control over political decisions, is possible because the UK can resist political integration with the EU. Leaving aside the reality of the interpenetration of the economic into the political and vice versa, this account makes a clear-cut distinction between the sphere of the economy and that of politics, which enables the participant to bypass the liminality of questions of sovereignty under Brexit and to come to a new (emergent?) settlement that temporarily resolves dilemmas of authority and power.

This narrowing of the political and the depoliticisation of the economy is a central feature of neoliberalism. With the exception of some left-wing participants in London who could more easily imagine alternatives to neoliberal economic globalisation (see Andreouli et al., 2019) and some right-wing *leave* supporters who could see the UK regaining its economic world power recovering its previous glory (Andreouli, 2019), sovereign control of the national economy was seen as impossible by *leave* and *remain* supporters alike because of the reality and irreversibility of economic globalisation.

The following extract from two *remain*-supporting participants in a mixed group of Conservative voters in the Southeast shows a clear account of the primacy and inevitability of “market sovereignty” over and above national sovereignty:

P1: But why do they pay the Poles, for example, a lower salary?

Interviewer: Because that's business. The world is competitive.

P1: Yes, but why are they allowed to do it? The EU could come in here and sort that out in terms of regulation. If you're out, it's always going to happen.

Interviewer: But you can't. . .

P2: It's all market forces.

The utterance “it’s all market forces” succinctly portrays a field of intelligibility for which the economic field of “the market” is an inescapable sovereign force over and above national governments and international structures such as the EU. As in the previous extract, this one alludes to a feeling of admitted defeat, that nothing can be done to rein in “the market.” Market forces are uncontrollable by nation-state (or indeed, international) authority, rendering the market itself the ultimate authority over global and national economies (“market forces” acquire the mythical quality of the sovereign).

Conclusions

This article has focused on the psycho-political relevance of the concept of sovereignty, which concerns the long-standing problem of sociosubjective justification of rule over a territory. We have argued that the theme of sovereignty arises under liminal conditions during which legal and political rationalities and forms of intelligibility that would be accepted under normal conditions are held in suspense while more basic questions emerge and are foregrounded. These include questions of borders and rights, of “the people,” of the justice of law, and of the sovereign authority to govern and decide who belongs within the territorial borders.

Focus group data served to illustrate how, during Brexit, the heated theme of sovereignty arose somewhat negatively among ordinary people as a potency of territorial control that has been lost or stolen or given away and that must be reclaimed: a lost capacity to make political decisions, to enforce British laws, to maintain British traditions, and to put the interests of British people first. Concerns over national sovereignty, particularly amongst *leave* voters, touched upon three main areas: politics, law, and culture/identity, each corresponding to a crucial aspect of “Britishness” understood through the prism of Britain’s relation to the EU. *Pro-remain* accounts were typically sceptical about calls for national sovereignty and positively foregrounded “postmodern” issues of global outlook including cultural exchange, openness towards diversity, and the benefits of internationalism.

Because questions of sovereignty arise during crises, the answers that are arrived at have a somewhat mythical and affectively charged quality that renders them paradoxical (Stenner, 2017): they are unstable and yet function to reduce instability and uncertainty. The issue of sovereignty is renewed precisely when the relationship between authority (ruler), obedience (ruled), and territory (jurisdiction) is once again perceived as a problem.

To illustrate this psycho-political process historically, we have sketched a rough picture of three significant mutations—each occasioned by liminal rupture—whereby ruling images of sovereignty morphed from a premodern sacred theological variant through a modern nation-stated centred political–theological variant, to a postmodern neoliberal economic globalisation variant. In the first mutation, religious semantics that had previously solved problems of conflict and afforded unified territorial integration became instead the source of conflict and were replaced by nationalist semantics. The modern era entered crisis when the solution afforded by these nationalist semantics became in turn a conflict-generating problem culminating in two world wars. The Brexit conjuncture arguably marks the exhaustion of the capacity of the subsequent neoliberal variant to


contain the global tensions it in turn engendered as a function of its limited focus on economic globalisation. In this sense, the event of Brexit marks an emergent struggle, not only for an alternative justification of sovereignty, but perhaps for an alternative *to* sovereignty. If we are to avoid the destructive resurgence of (fusions of) religious, nationalistic, and purely economic themes of sovereignty, it will be necessary to articulate new and more adequate principles for a “coming politics” capable of just societal co-ordination from the global to the local.

In this respect, Brexit can be read as a “symptom” of a broader global transformation that risks once again being led by the old major national powers (most conspicuously the USA and UK) but in a global context in which the West has lost economic ground to China, Russia, and other world powers whose national sovereignty has never approximated the democratic form of legitimation (and thus rely on nationalism). In the absence of any agreed principles of sovereignty, the game is now centring on the instrumental use of national politics (by any means) to secure advantageous control over global economy. Hence, in the name of defending its own national “sovereignty,” Russia can emphatically deny Ukrainian “sovereignty,” accusing those in the West who defend that “sovereignty” of having plentiful experience of violating the “sovereignty” of other nations. Power politics arbitrates sovereignty. But there is a profound arbitrariness to these arbitrations of sovereignty. In response, rather than awaiting one more mutation in the semantics of sovereignty, we urge for a field of intelligibility adequate to the actual global field. In reflecting on this psychosocial problem from a scientific perspective, it is wise to combine Toynbee’s (1972) historical observation that the nation never was and never can be a universe unto itself with the directly related psychological observation that there is no such thing as a self-contained individual (Sampson, 1989). Sovereign are they who affirm the impossibility of sovereignty.

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Notes

1. The discourse of sovereignty arose during crises, for example, Bodin’s (1576) contribution during postreformation religious conflict in France; Hobbes’ (1651) contribution of a secular sovereign Leviathan during the turmoil of the English civil wars; Schmitt’s (1922/2005) emphasis on the sovereign state of exception during the collapse of the Weimar Republic. After the devastation of the Second World War, Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault began questioning the very basis of sovereignty in a manner that inspired Giorgio Agamben (1998) to dream of a “coming politics” for which “the concepts of *sovereignty* and of *constituent power*, which are at the core of our political tradition, have to be abandoned or at least to be thought all over again” (p. 112).
2. Before the 16th century, there was no such unilateral European dominance (Webb, 2017). The human world was ordered by a dozen or so empires including the Chinese and Russian states;

the Mughal, Ottoman, and Maghreb Empires; and the European empires of the Portuguese, Spanish, British, French, and Dutch, as well as numerous smaller states and locales (Subrahmanyam, 2017). It also included the empires of “pre-Columbian” Mesoamerica whose conquest and destruction by Western powers literally transformed the world and worldviews of the globe, linking two entire hemispheres with global implications. Indeed, this new scope for exploitation was the moment Western Europe ceased to be the liminal *periphery* of the known world and acquired a new geopolitical centrality.

3. Great Britain was formed by the 1707 union of England and Scotland.
4. Early modern globalisation was preceded by a liminal phase of demographic collapse caused by recurrent outbreaks of Black Death, which had spread through Asia along trade routes from China to reach Europe during the second part of the 14th century (Webb, 2017). Lacking a “germ theory” of disease, plague disorder was blamed on heretical religious ideas. The response was a “hardening” of religious dogma (Harste, 2021). Particularly in Christian areas, responses to the challenges of plague disorder engendered the new forms of social order documented by Foucault (2007) as crucial to later European state development and dominance.

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