Does Brexit mean the end for Critical Management Studies in Britain?

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In this essay I will argue that Brexit – the vote for Britain to leave the European Union – has enacted a fundamental shift in British politics and society which poses significant challenges for Critical Management Studies (CMS) in Britain, and possibly even marks its death knell. It is intended as a provocation to debate and as such many will strongly disagree, or at least feel uncomfortable, with it. Perhaps that disagreement will, even, be a springboard for CMS academics and activists to respond to Brexit in ways I have not anticipated and thereby prove me wrong in my diagnosis.

I want to begin this analysis by clarifying its terms and purposes, both in the sense of what I am trying to talk about and what I am not trying to talk about. First, I am talking about CMS, but of course in doing so that begs the question of what CMS is, something which has been persistently agonised over (e.g. Sotirin & Tyrell, 1998; Fournier & Grey, 2000) almost since it emerged as a term. If there is a consensus view it is that it is a "composite beset by internal strains and tensions, not a unified movement" (Grey & Willmott, 20012: 411) with a "sprawling as well as open, ill-defined nature" (Willmott, 2013: 138) making it "difficult or even inappropriate to definitively 'label' CMS" (Murphy et al., 2013: xiv) which alerts us to the fact that this it cannot be spoken of in a homogenous way. Still, there is a large body of literature which explicitly adopts the CMS label, along with conferences, handbooks and so

on, and although this is very far from homogenous it's still meaningful to talk about CMS in a general way, just as one might for any other academic orientation.

But more specifically I want to talk about CMS not as an academic literature but as a project entailing a general "leftist political orientation" (Grey, 2005: 175) which, if not envisageable as a political "party" then at least constituting a political "big tent" (Parker, 2013: 171) which might be regarded as a kind of social movement (Willmott, 2013). Paul Adler (2002) envisages this politics as being, at the most generic level "progressive" and, more precisely, based on "labor, feminist, anti-racist, ecological and other perspectives" (2002: 387) but not tied to any particular theoretical perspective.

I plainly don't, and couldn't, mean by that that CMS as a body of literature or as a collection of individuals who may produce, read or identify with that literature all share a common set of political views. Nor do I mean to imply that CMS has articulated a position as regards Brexit specifically, or even that it has ever much interested itself in or been engaged with the EU as a political institution. Instead I mean (and will discuss later) that CMS has, again in general, a particular kind of liberal-left orientation which is critical of neo-liberal globalization, managerialism, consumerism, inequality and elites, and corporate domination whilst being sympathetic to feminism, environmentalism, post-colonialism, gay rights, anti-racism, labour and liberation movements. And although any generalization of this kind can be questioned, what I think is unquestionable is that there is no existing statement of the politics of CMS that endorses, let alone makes central, the nationalist politics of the Brexit campaign (whether that nationalism took the form of anti-immigration sentiment or of the more abstract notion of national sovereignty embedded in the core Brexit slogan of 'taking back control').

The second opening clarification is that I am talking specifically and solely about CMS in Britain. CMS exists in various forms in many other countries (see Grey et al., 2016) and I doubt that Brexit will, in itself, have any significant impact on it in those countries. Nevertheless, to the extent that the origins of CMS are associated quite closely with Britain (Parker, 2016: 196-97), and that it is here that it has arguably been most strongly established, what happens here may have wider implications. Third, I am not seeking to provide an analysis of Brexit in general and its implications for either Britain or the EU; or even of its wider implications for management and organization studies, or for organizations. So I'm not saying anything particularly 'new' about Brexit – about which trillions of words have and will be written: I am solely concerned with what the politics of Brexit might mean for CMS in Britain.

Britain was viscerally and bitterly divided (O'Reilly, 2016) by the EU Referendum campaign and, now, by its consequences, and Brexit swamps just about every other political issue both at the present time and, most likely, for several years to come. It revealed divisions between social classes, cities and regions, generations, and even split families; moreover, these divisions cut right across the lines of the main political parties. This certainly does not mean that Brexit came from nowhere and that the divisions it exposed were not already manifest in various ways. But what the vote did was to crystallise those divisions in the most visible of ways and not as a one off event in 2016, because the scale of what Brexit involves economically, culturally and politically means that for the foreseeable future just about every public policy issue will be framed by it. Hence the 'leavers' versus 'remainers' (and within that different shades of what 'leave' and 'remain' mean) distinction in turn frames the terms of political participation. Such a highly polarised landscape inevitably impacts upon CMS as it does for upon every other part of British politics and society.

My argument is, first, that in the Referendum vote CMS, understood as the political project identified above, found itself on the same, anti-Brexit, side as big business and mainstream management studies (MMS), making it hard to sustain itself as something separate from these. Second, I argue that this reflects a wider set of issues about the liberal-left and the EU which, third, means that CMS now finds itself located within what is regarded by the pro-Brexit side as 'the establishment elite', and that to work effectively against Brexit British CMS will need to work as part of that establishment elite. My conclusion is that this may mark the end of British CMS as it has hitherto existed.

CMS and the Brexit vote

One way of approaching the implications of Brexit for CMS in Britain is this. The question of EU membership was a binary question of 'in or out' that admitted of no ambiguity: you were on one side or the other. Within that binary CMS academics and MMS academics – and, for that matter, those management academics who don't, or don't consider themselves, to fit under either of those labels - were likely to have been on the same side.

Of course I don't know how individuals voted – and to make the point again, I am not claiming that every CMS academic voted to remain - but several opinion polls show a strong correlation between higher levels of education and propensity to vote to remain: 64% of those people with a higher degree who voted, voted to remain (Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2016). One, admittedly self-selecting, survey showed an astounding 90% level of support for remain amongst, specifically, university staff (Times Higher Education, 2016). This was reflected in the way that cities with major universities (e.g. Cambridge, Oxford, Bristol) voted to remain. So it seems highly likely that the majority of staff in management and business schools, whether CMS oriented or not, voted remain. For what it is worth (and no

more), that is certainly consistent with my own sense from numerous conversations with such people.

Not only did Brexit put CMS and MMS academics on the same side, it also put CMS on the same side as the vast majority of big business and financial capital, whose leaders and representative bodies were virtually unanimous in their desire to remain within the EU (as were most leaders and representative bodies of universities and business schools). If that seems an uncomfortable and ironic positioning to critical academics, then it would not seem so to many Brexiters. The *leitmotif* of the populist Brexit campaign and result was that it was an anti-elitist rebellion, and the elite referred to consists quite as much, and perhaps more, of the intellectual elite as it does of the corporate elite. Indeed, both are subsumed, and disdained, under the label of the 'liberal elite'.

There is a need for considerable scepticism about this, of course. The leave campaign was fronted almost entirely by figures who by normal reckonings would be considered part of the elite in terms of educational and class background, and, in most cases were both socially liberal, economically liberal or both. Examples include the *de facto* leader of the official Leave Campaign, Boris Johnson, educated at Eton and Oxford. This leads to many complexities and ironies for what Brexit will mean, which I will discuss later.

But even if we are sceptical about the non-elite credentials of its leaders, the leave vote is widely interpreted as having been driven to some large degree by the wrath of those 'left behind' by globalization, especially as regards employment and conditions of employment (Warhurst, 2016). Paralleling Trump's core vote in rust belt America, the archetype of the Brexit voter is someone from the white working class, living in England but outside of Greater London and most big cities, in regions which have been substantially de-

industrialized over several decades[1]. Indeed this has become pretty much the standard diagnosis of Brexit, and of nationalist populism more generally (e.g. Hochschild, 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

The evidence of the voting patterns bears this out to a considerable extent. It was in those regions of England that the leave vote was strongest, and it was amongst the lower social classes, lowest education, lowest employment rate and lowest income groups that the leave vote was strongest; and amongst those who thought that globalization was 'a force for ill', 69% voted to leave (Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2016). However, it should not be ignored that there were plenty of more prosperous, middle-class people and areas that voted to leave. Moreover, statistics about the income, employment and educational levels of leavers are to an extent skewed by the fact that age was also closely correlated with voting to leave. Thus retired voters will also show up as economically inactive, on lower incomes (i.e. pensions) and, because they pre-dated the large-scale expansion of post-compulsory and higher education, as less educated.

So there are caveats to be made to the broad picture, but it still remains the case that the vote opened up a large chasm based on social class and education, and within that chasm CMS academics (like academics in general) are likely to have been on the remain side and therefore stand in opposition to largely working-class voters[2]. But this is not just about economic marginalization. The vote also showed a profound division on social and political issues. Specifically, the populism associated with Brexit is explicable not just in terms of the

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[1] It is tempting to add 'male' to this archetype, as much of the anger of populist politics seems to come from men. But the polling evidence suggests that gender was not a factor in the Brexit vote. It is also, of course, precisely an 'archetype': I don't mean that only voters of this type voted for Brexit (or Trump).

[2] Social class, as defined in the polling evidence, refers to occupation rather than origin or identification. Thus in this sense academics are by definition in social classes AB which voted 57-43 remain by contrast with 36-64 in social classes C2DE (Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2016)

economic insecurity associated with economic liberalism but also as part of a 'cultural backlash' against social liberalism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2009) found even amongst those who do not suffer as a result of economic liberalism and may even benefit from it.

Thus the referendum vote showed that around 80% of people who thought that multi-culturalism, social liberalism, the green movement and immigration were 'forces for ill' voted to leave the EU, as did about 74% of people who thought feminism was a force for ill. The situation was more or less reversed amongst those who voted to remain. It is not a great leap of the imagination to see where CMS academics are likely to have been located on such issues. But the issue here is only partly about how CMS academics are likely to have voted as individuals. The more important point is that the political project of CMS itself is at odds with the underlying politics of the Brexit vote as evidenced by its strong associations with social illiberalism. If writers like Adler (2002) and Parker (2002; 2013) are right then CMS politics encompasses the feminism, environmentalism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism and so on, hostility to which associates with the Brexit vote. Moreover, CMS politics may also be anti-capitalist politics but – and it is an important but - the Brexit vote did *not* associate with seeing 'capitalism' as a force for good or ill: on this, both remainers and leavers split about 50/50. (All figures from Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2016).

CMS, the EU and the Liberal-Left

To the extent that the Brexit can indeed be understood as a response to neo-liberal globalization by its discontents and victims – and with the caveats I have made, this can't be ignored as one important part of the explanation – and to the extent that CMS academics were opposed to Brexit it poses an obvious problem for CMS. Parker's (2013: 177) evocation

of the CMS political big tent depicts it as being "in sympathy with a wide range of critiques of capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism ... which might include … anti-capitalist protestors, shareholder activists, trade unionists, environmental campaigners, ethical investors and those who care about slow food, local money …". So if CMS has this anti-neo-liberal globalization, pro-localism politics, how come it is on the 'wrong side' of Brexit?

This question is not unique to CMS, of course. In various ways they exist for the wider British liberal-left of which CMS is to some degree a species. There has long been a Left critique of the EU for precisely the reason that it can be seen as an aspect of neo-liberal globalization. In the 1970s when Britain joined (what became) the EU most of the opposition to doing so did indeed come from the Left on the basis that it was a 'capitalist club'. This was the view of Tony Benn, then the leading figure of the British Left, and of Jeremy Corbyn who by the time of the 2017 Referendum was the leader of the Labour Party. Corbyn did campaign against Brexit, but was widely seen as having done so half-heartedly and at the time of writing endorses not just Brexit but 'hard Brexit' (meaning exit not just from the EU but from the European single market). Others on the Left (such as the Rail, Transport and Maritime Union) explicitly endorsed 'Lexit' (Left Brexit) during the Referendum exactly for the reason that Benn had opposed EU membership in the 1970s.

However, many other parts of the British Left had long ago come to the view that the EU offered the best way of controlling the neo-liberal ascendancy within the UK, so strong since 1980s Thatcherism, especially in the aftermath of the collapse of communism. More generally, from this perspective the EU could be seen as a tentative step towards if not global then at least regional regulation of capital. Freedom of movement for labour was a particularly important aspect of this, because it at least gave labour some of the rights of

international mobility that would otherwise be restricted to capital and in any case sat well with the traditional internationalism of many parts of the liberal-left. That, of course, was a significant fault-line in the Brexit debate since this unrestricted immigration for EU citizens was a major argument made for leaving. It is for this reason that, again at the time of writing, the British Labour Party remains split between those, including its leadership, who support hard Brexit and those who wish to see either a soft Brexit (remaining within the European single market) or no Brexit at all.

What this adds up to, then, is that for CMS as for many on the liberal-left, working class voters were asking the right question but gave the 'wrong answer'. If emancipation from oppression and opposition to neo-liberal globalization (exemplified by the financial crisis) are the hallmarks of CMS then the working class has decided to emancipate itself by embracing nativism (often with a racist element), populism, nationalism and illiberalism. That wasn't the answer that CMS would give, not least since it is likely to be highly self-defeating for those 'left behind by globalization' because for reasons I will expand upon shortly they are likely to be the biggest losers from Brexit.

Such prognostications are unlikely to cut much ice with leave voters, though. They are just a species of the 'Project Fear' rhetoric found in the mouths of Conservative politicians and, again, the elite. There are only very limited signs (at the time of writing: October 2017) of any regret on the part of leave voters, and very little evidence that they would acquiesce to the idea that they gave the 'wrong answer'. Instead, there is a strong sense of having 'put two fingers up' at the massed ranks of the elite, the establishment and the 'experts' – a grouping that includes 'us', CMS academics. In the now highly polarised politics of Brexit Britain there is therefore a strong temptation for us to return the gesture. Unless we are to

fall back on that old Marxist trope of 'false consciousness' we end up saying: you made the choice, you gave the wrong answer, so you will have to suffer the consequences. Alternatively, we end up saying, patronizingly, that we understand the frustrations and sufferings that gave rise to that choice, as if placating a child's tantrum. Either way, in the form that anti-globalization sentiment has most powerfully and effectively articulated itself, CMS is not on the side of that sentiment.

CMS and the politics of post-referendum Britain

CMS in Britain cannot be understood in isolation from politics in general and the politics of neo-liberalism in particular. Fournier & Grey (2000: 10-11) explain the emergence of UK CMS in part in terms of the terrain of the 1980s Thatcherite New Right and the subsequent embrace of neo-liberalism by the New Labour party in the 1990s and 2000s. But New Labour added a particular dimension of technocratic managerialism, so that the nexus of what Parker (2002) called 'market-managerialism' became the target of critique for CMS.

The wider framing of the Thatcherite and New Labour rapprochement (Heffernan, 2001) was the supposed 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992) that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now, not just capitalism but the turbocharged 'new capitalism' (Sennett, 2006) of globalizing neo-liberalism was the only game in town and, as New Labour's guru sociologist had it, we had moved 'beyond left and right' (Giddens, 1994) into a post-ideological politics. Hence much CMS was concerned to show how technocratic managerialism was, in fact, deeply ideological; and to line up with the critics, both in the academy and on the street, of globalization. If the dominant narrative was there is no alternative (TINA) to the market, CMS was one of the voices protesting that alternatives did indeed exist.

Much of this now seems very dated. Whilst managerialism cannot be said to have disappeared, the New Labour era of 'what matters is what works' in policy-making is a distant memory. And, more to the present point, the anti-globalization movement that has proved successful is not Occupy and the like but the nationalism, nativism and (supposed, though unlikely to be realised) economic protectionism of Brexit and Trump. Ideology is back with a vengeance but, again, it's the wrong sort of ideology from a CMS perspective. TINA is out of fashion, but the alternative coming into fashion isn't anything like what CMS envisaged. In short, the ground in which CMS grew in the UK has shifted, if not disappeared.

The complexity in this lies in the way that, despite the support of nativist voters, Brexit is being enacted as a new and intensified form of globalization. Precisely because the leave leaders were almost entirely free market globalists, and with Brexit policy firmly driven from the Thatcherite hard Right of the Conservative Party, what is envisioned is a 'buccaneering' Britain 're-discovering' its global trade role. Thus Liam Fox, a leading Brexit campaigner appointed to the government after the referendum result, declared:

"I believe the UK is in a prime position to become a world leader in free trade because of the brave and historic decision of the British people to leave the European Union" (Fox, 2016)

Freed from the constraints of the EU, these globalist Brexiters argue, Britain can sign trade deals around the world and also get rid of all the supposedly European bureaucratic red tape which in practice seems to mean labour rights and environmental standards. At the least, the desperation to sign trade deals on any terms after Brexit is likely to diminish these rights and standards and possibly lead to further privatization of the NHS in particular. Meanwhile, declining tax receipts are likely to fuel public service cuts and it is not even clear

that immigration levels will fall (and if they do this is likely to have adverse consequences for the economy and public services). At the extreme, it is conceivable that the UK will become a low-wage, low regulation tax haven; the 'European Singapore' favoured by some leading Brexiters.

CMS, one must assume from all the ways it has been discussed, would be hostile to such a politics, which means that it must also be hostile to Brexit (even a CMS 'Lexiter' will be hostile to this hard Right Brexit). But because the Tory Brexit vision is so profoundly unrealistic it is equally opposed by the bulk of big business and finance – not, presumably, because of a lament for labour rights and environmental standards but because it is completely out of kilter with the way that the British economy actually works. For example, businesses benefit from free movement of people and also from the removal of non-tariff barriers to trade which is the defining and, for businesses, superior feature of the European single market as opposed to any other form of free trade agreement or area.

So not just in their stance to the Referendum vote but also because the post-vote developments lead them, albeit for different reasons, to continue to be anti-Brexit, CMS, big business and for that matter MMS will continue to be in the same camp. But as well as now being aligned with big business CMS is also part of the elite, in the way that Brexit populists view it, because of the kind of politics it espouses. CMS, in the main, has not been labourist in orientation but, rather, has affiliated to a wider politics of difference encompassing, as Fournier & Grey (2000: 27) put it, "feminists, gay and lesbian movements, black activists" as well as environmentalism, post-colonialism and the anti-patriarchy, anti-racist and anti-imperialist stances referred to by Parker (2013: 17) and Adler (2002: 387), as quoted earlier. In British CMS that has been perhaps particularly true to the extent that it arose to some

large degree from an antagonistic split with Labour Process Analysis, with its more Marxist and labourist commitments.

Again this mirrors wider development in the politics of the liberal-left, a politics which, according to Hochschild (2016) and others has by embodying an 'identity politics' fundamentally alienated the 'white working class' (WWC) whom it seems to put at the back of the queue. There's an obvious irony here in the way that this victimhood narrative of the WWC is *itself* a form of identity politics (Goodfellow, 2016) and is promulgated most assiduously by those who have turned their backs on labourism. But in any case, it is not just about the WWC. The politics of CMS is equally alienating to sections of the middle class who perceive 'political correctness to have gone mad'. In other words, CMS embodies that social liberalism to which the 'cultural backlash' of Brexit populism is in part a response as well as now aligning with big business. Which might be another way of saying that the lazy sneer of Brexiters about an elite in which they lump together socially liberal intellectuals and corporate fat cats turns out, rather annoyingly, to be true[3]. Perhaps Brexit has served to make plainly visible the way that the very success of CMS in the UK has made "what once seemed 'outsider' into something rather insider … taking on the values associated with the centres of power" (Parker, 2016: 200).

Conclusion

The Referendum result was ostensibly a vote against British membership of the EU. But it coded a whole range of other things, including a vote against economic and cultural

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[3] There's obviously something inherently absurd in the idea that those who voted remain constitute an elite, since 48% of those who voted did so. But Brexiters aren't by and large referring to all the voters but to the educated, the expert, those who are to some degree in positions of authority. Which, like it or not, includes CMS academics.

globalization, social liberalism, and the liberal elite. In this sense, it can be regarded as a vote against many of the things that CMS stands for. Even where there might be common ground – opposition to neo-liberal globalization – the form that this took in Brexit was not that of CMS, and the opposition to social liberalism is an outright rejection of CMS politics. Because Brexit has polarised British politics into two sides there is no place for a middle ground (at least not amongst those who are politically engaged)[4]. CMS, like it or not, is in the same camp as business, MMS and the socially liberal elite. It might be objected that it is not necessary for CMS to diverge from all aspects of MMS and business in order to retain its critical identity. But that is to overlook the fundamental binary divide of Brexit as the defining meta-issue of British politics. Similarly, it might, as one anonymous reviewer of this paper suggested, be objected CMS is also in the same camp as academics in physics, antiquity scholars or any other disciplines and so being also with MMS is neither here nor there. But, of course, CMS doesn't define itself in contrast to all those disciplines; it does so in contrast to MMS, its "Big Other" as (Parker 2002: 120) puts it. That can't be sustained if on the biggest and most divisive issue for many decades CMS and its other are indistinguishable.

I think this means that CMS in the UK is now in a significantly different political terrain to that which obtained since it emerged in the 1990s, and this makes it unclear how it can operate. One position would be to align with those who continue to seek 'Lexit', but that means working in isolation from the most powerful parts of the emergent anti-Brexit coalition[5]. These include many business leaders, university leaders, journalists, think tanks,

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[4] It's not my focus here, but it's worth saying that is not just CMS and the liberal-left whose politics have been redefined by Brexit. Consider the position of the (many) pro-EU Conservatives who now belong to a party which is pursuing a policy at odds with the vast majority of its traditional support base in business and finance.
[5] A piece such as this is always liable to date – rapidly, given the unpredictable politics of Brexit. It is therefore possible that a Labour government will form and pursue Lexit. That changes the dynamics of Brexit and what it

reputedly most senior civil servants, conservative politicians such as former Prime Minister John Major and Ken Clarke and New Labour figures such as Peter Mandelson and Tony Blair. Thus to work effectively against Brexit CMS must make common cause with many of the erstwhile targets of its critique; to become, in this sense, a part of 'the Establishment'. And it is important to bear in mind that (on the basis of the polling evidence quoted earlier) Brexit was not a vote against capitalism *per se* in the way that it was against globalization and social liberalism. In any case, what such a 'Lexit' position is predicated on is the possibility of there not being two sides but a variety of positions.

That possibility may have some purchase. The binary polarization of the referendum may soften in time. In particular, it is possible that the fissures on the Brexit side between its globalist and economically liberal leaders and the nationalism and protectionism of many of its supporters will fracture that side of the argument. That then also makes it easier for a range of anti-Brexit positions to be articulated. It certainly seems reasonable to think that as the process of leaving the EU unfolds the consequences are highly unpredictable, so precise predictions are probably foolish.

Even so, at the moment I think the grounds for optimism are slim. No doubt there will continue to be a place for critical papers about managerialism, handbooks, conferences, and so on. And no doubt there are many individuals who affiliate with CMS for whom Brexit is unproblematic or indeed irrelevant (to repeat, it is not my argument and it is not necessary to my argument that all CMS academics are opposed to Brexit). But understood in terms of its broad political project the omens for British CMS are not good. CMS has always stood in

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means for CMS, but in complex ways given that, at present, Labour is drawing electoral support from both nativist Brexiters in some of its traditional heartlands and younger, urban remainers. Thus the same basic binary sides will persist, albeit in a different context to that of a Conservative government. Moreover, even is Brexit is somehow abandoned altogether, the scars and divisions will endure.

some way – complex, qualified, contested and varied, no doubt – for a politics that favours the marginalised, the oppressed, and the powerless against the privilege and power of the elite (Adler, 2002; Murphy et al, 2013; Parker, 2013). Unfortunately, the marginalised, oppressed and powerless have in large numbers voted against much that CMS believes in and positioned CMS as part of a privileged and powerful elite establishment which they despise: perhaps that was always so, but Brexit makes it explicit and unavoidable. If CMS is to work effectively as part of an anti-Brexit coalition it will have to work as part of that elite establishment, which inevitably involves compromising and diluting its criticality. It may be that British CMS academics and activists will find new and creative ways to articulate CMS in the post-Brexit landscape that I am unable to see. I hope so. But I suspect that in retrospect CMS in Britain will be remembered, if at all, as a curious artefact of a period bookended by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the populist wave of 2016.

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