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Workington Man, Brexit and Populism: Discussions of Politics, Identity and Class among Rugby League Fans Online

Karl Spracklen, Leeds Beckett University, UK

K.Spracklen@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Lee Spracklen. Independent Scholar, UK

lee.spracklen@gmail.com

Corresponding author contact details:

Professor of Sociology of Leisure and Culture

Leeds School of Social Sciences

Leeds Beckett University

City Campus, Calverley 920, LS1 3HE

K.Spracklen@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Abstract

In the run-up to the 2019 UK General Election, Conservative thinktank Onward identified Workington Man as the voter the Conservatives had to target to win seats in the Labour dominated, leave-voting north of England. Workington Man is white, working-class, with no university education, voted Leave in 2016, and he is a fan of rugby league. In this research, we explore how rugby league fans and journalists responded to this during the election period, through a content analysis of public websites rlfans.com, comments below-the-line in *The Guardian*'s story about Workington Man. and discussions in rugby league magazine *Forty-20*. In looking at the debate about the legitimacy of the stereotype, we also widen our research to explore how fans online have talked about Brexit and Europe in the context of the General Election. We show that although most rugby league fans online and journalists held left-wing, progressive views situated in their belief that rugby league is a site of counter-hegemonic, working-class resistance to the southern English Establishment symbolised by rugby union, some rugby-league fans online were aligned with populism and right-wing beliefs about liberal elites and the European Union. The success of the Conservatives on 12 December in most of these rugby league seats demonstrates that the tactic worked, and that the views of fans online was not representative of the wider electorate.

Introduction

On the morning of Friday 06 December, in the penultimate week of campaigning in the 2019 United Kingdom (UK) General Election, Conservative cabinet member Michael Gove, attacked Labour for suggesting that the right to vote in any hypothetical second referendum on European Union (EU) membership could be extended to EU citizens living in this country. Gove, one of the key people behind the populist, radical right¹ pro-Brexit turn in Conservative politics (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020), was also one of the people who led the campaign to leave Europe in 2016 (Watson, 2020) – so it was not unexpected to see him appear on BBC Radio 4's Today programme fulminating against any suggestion that might give a Labour-backed second referendum any chance to keep the UK. What was interesting was the analogy Gove deployed. As reported in *The Guardian*, he said:²

It is the case that EU nationals don't vote, have never voted in general elections, and therefore don't vote, have never voted in referendums like the Brexit referendum – and, therefore, we just think it would be unfair... It's a bit like a rugby league final, 13 players on either side. If one team suddenly said we're going to play rugby union instead and bring two extra players on to the field, that simply wouldn't be fair.

Neither Gove nor Conservative Leader and Prime Minister have ever invoked knowledge of rugby league, nor shown any real interest in it, as far as we can ascertain by searching news archives. Ignoring the strained logic of the analogy, the point is that Gove, a man who attended an elite private school in Scotland then went to Oxford University, a man one would expect to only ever play or watch rugby union, all of a sudden is talking about rugby league: the game associated with the post-industrial towns of the north of England (Collins, 1999, 2006; Spracklen, 2016).

In the run-up to the 2019 UK General Election, Conservative think tank Onward identified Workington Man as the voter the Conservatives had to target to win seats in the Labour dominated, leave-voting north of England. In a report provocatively titled *Politics of*

¹ Through this paper we will follow the definition of the radical right turn in the work of Sobolewska and Ford (2020): the radical right has emerged as a force in mainstream politics in the UK as a result of the clash between conviction identity liberals (graduates) and identity conservatives (the white working-class school leavers). It is populist as the radical right attempt to speak to people who believe themselves to be marginalised from politics.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/dec/06/michael-gove-hits-out-at-labour-plan-to-let-eu-citizens-vote-in-referendum>.

Belonging (O'Shaughnessy and Tanner, 2019), published on 30 October and based on interviews and focus groups up and down the country, the think-tank argued that traditional Labour voters who voted Leave in the 2016 EU Referendum were on the verge of switching to the Conservatives, but only if the party promised a manifesto that increased funding for the NHS, for the public sector and for the English regions.³ It is an irony that the alienation felt by Workington Man is a direct consequence of Margaret Thatcher's deliberate shutdown of heavy industries in the region, and on-going policies of neo-liberal austerity imposed by Conservative government (Jessop, 2015). Onward argued that Workington Man is white, working-class, with no university education, voted Leave in 2016, and he is a fan of rugby league. He has always voted Labour but is ready to be convinced that the EU and liberal Remain elites are to blame for his plight. In this research paper, we explore how rugby league fans and journalists responded to this during the election period, through a Discourse Tracing content analysis (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009) of public websites rlfans.com, comments below-the-line in *The Guardian's* story about Workington Man, and discussions in rugby league magazine *Forty20*. In looking at the debate about the legitimacy of the stereotype, we also widen our research to explore how fans online have talked about Brexit and Europe in the context of the General Election. We show that although most rugby league fans online and journalists held left-wing, progressive views situated in their belief that rugby league is a site of counter-hegemonic, working-class resistance to the southern English Establishment symbolised by rugby union, some rugby-league fans online were aligned with radical right beliefs about liberal elites and the European Union. The success of the Conservatives on 12 December in most of these rugby league seats⁴ and across the rest of small-town white working-class north of England, demonstrates that the tactic worked, and that the views of fans online were not representative of the wider electorate.

The rest of our paper is structured as follows. We start with a small theoretical framework that situates our research in political sociology and sociology of sport. We then explore the class construction of rugby league and rugby union historically, and how both

³ <https://www.ukonward.com/new-onward-research-the-politics-of-belonging/>. The first author of the report is a member of the House of Lords, a Tory life peer appointed after service in the office of former Prime Minister David Cameron – a quintessential Establishment type who went to public school and Oxford, just the kind of person Workington Man should have treated with suspicion.

⁴ They defeated Labour in Workington, as well as these seats with professional rugby league clubs in the north of England: Barrow & Furness, Dewsbury, Keighley, Leigh, Wakefield, and Warrington South. They also gained Wrexham the home of North Wales Crusaders, a constituency with the same demographic as those in the north of England. The Conservatives picked up other seats in the north with similar demographics and social deprivation to Workington, such as Scunthorpe and Redcar.

sports are used today to mark out different communities and symbolic identities in the UK. We then discuss our methods, before we undertake our three analyses: that of rugby league journalists and sports historian Tony Collins writing about Workington Man; that of commentators responding to the Collins article; and finally an analysis of Brexit, Europe, politics and the run-up to the General Election on fan website rlfans.com.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework is essentially Bourdieusian (Cushion and Jones, 2010; Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010). We believe politics, sport and leisure can all be understood as particular fields in which actors use their agency, their habitus and their capital shape the construction of identities and communities. Gramsci (1971) shows how political agents and parties strive to impose their hegemonic control on the public sphere – the media in particular – to ensure they maintain their hegemony. For Gramsci, all political action by counter-hegemonic agents is constrained, and it is difficult for anyone other than elites to exercise freedom and power. This is why Bourdieu (1986) offers a way to see power hierarchies as something more than just hegemonic. Different fields have different forms of social, economic and cultural capital, with habitus being learned through agency and simultaneously constrained by social structures and political hierarchies. Recently, Bourdieu's trinity of field, habitus and capital have been used successfully to map the success of political networks and counter-hegemonic resistance (Ibrahim, 2015; Ibrahim and Roberts, 2018).

In this paper, we are also interested in aligning and engaging with other research on the rise of populism, the radical right and the alt-right (Coady, 2019; Fox, 2020; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2017; Kammers, 2017; Spracklen, 2020a). In particular, we are interested in aligning with the critique of the 'channelling discontent' thesis made by Kammers (2017), and the similar point made by Fox (2020): that alienation and dis-satisfaction with mainstream politics provides room for agency across the political divide. There is no doubt that populism has grown across the world, with many democracies in the West becoming more dominated by right-wing populist parties, with policies and election campaigns that promote nationalism, social conservatism and protectionism (Mudde, 2017). These policies are shaped to appeal to identity conservatives, older people more likely to vote who fear the consequences of globalisation (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). This shift has occurred at the same time as online spaces have become dominated by alt-right and men-first discourses, with social media becoming an unregulated space where white, working-class men can find community and conspiracy theory (Coady, 2019). The alt-right merges seamlessly with

nationalists, fascists and other racists online (Spracklen, 2020a), and has reacted to a turn to far-right populism in mainstream politics by voting in successive radical right governments from Hungary to the United States of America (Kammers, 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2017; Wilson, 2018).

Finally, we align with sociology of sport. Adorno saw sports as one element of the wider culture industry (Adorno, 1971), a product of modernity designed by elites to keep the working-classes in check.⁵ Association football hooligan fans in the seventies and eighties were seen by figurationalists such as Elias and Dunning as being mimetic in their violence, and the decline of real violence was evidence of the civilizing process (Elias, 1978, 1982; Elias and Dunning, 1986). Others saw football fandom as the representation of working-class, masculine resistance in an age that was post-Fordist (King, 2002; Redhead, 2002). In this new century, as sports especially football, have become hyper-commodified, sociologists such as Millward (2011, 2012) have turned to explorations of how football fans still find belonging and community through sports activism operating as a field in which such commodification is resisted. Sociologists have shown how sports are spaces in which race, gender and sexuality are still constructed in ways that maintain hegemony (Dixon, 2013; Hawkes, 2018; Melnick and Wann, 2011). Others, however, show that sports fandom can be a space for liberation, for the construction of belonging, identity and community (Reinhard, 2018; Sandvoss, 2004). Sociologists of leisure has a tried to explore its salience in the construction of identity and community, and the limits of agency in doing and watching sport (Spracklen, 2009). We situate our work in this work of sports fandom as agency and activism in Bourdieusian fields and related networks of agents, and sports fandom as the construction and maintenance of hierarchies of inequality.

A Class History of Rugby League and Rugby Union in the UK

In 1895, the Rugby Football Union (RFU) in England was split, with a breakaway of a group of clubs calling themselves the Northern Rugby Football Union (Collins, 1999). These northern clubs run by local elites in Yorkshire and Lancashire, had started to attract thousands of working-class spectators, and had faced accusations that they were paying their players. These allegations were becoming increasingly troublesome for the RFU at this time, because it was becoming more fundamentalist in its adherence to amateurism and the elite

⁵ This is not a new idea: Juvenal mocked Roman leaders for using 'bread and circuses' to keep the people happy (see discussion in the textbook Spracklen, 2015).

hegemony associated with it. The Northern Union quickly adopted rules that allowed payments to players, abandoned rucks and mauls and line-outs, introduced the play-the-ball, and reduced the number of players from 15 to 13. Later, the name changed to rugby league and the governing body to the Rugby Football League (Collins, 2005). Until 1995, when the RFU became openly professional, it maintained long-term bans for people who even played a trial for a rugby league club.

Through the history of rugby league and rugby union in the UK, between 1895 and 1995, rugby union was the game of the middle and upper classes of England, played in private schools, universities, the military and in clubs enculturated in the cult of the gentleman amateur (Collins, 2005, 2015; Spracklen, 2016; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2020).⁶ Sports reporters in the press, on radio, then on television, promoted this privileged position of rugby union. In contrast, rugby league received little official support or recognition, and was banned from universities and the military because of its professional nature. Rugby league officials tried to spread their game to other parts of England and failed, and its professional and amateur heartlands were entrenched in the M62 Belt of Yorkshire and Lancashire, and the Cumberland coast where Workington is situated (Spracklen, 2016). When rugby union became professional, it was partly a reaction against rugby league becoming dominant in New South Wales in Australia, and in the wake of News Corp showing interest in what became Super League – a global rugby league brand. Since then, rugby union has become even more hegemonic and representative of the English middle-classes, as rugby league has struggled to get fair coverage in the public sphere against the old-school tie connections that ensure rugby union gets sponsors, air-time and column inches (Collins, 2015). Rugby league, though, survived in the north of England as an imagined, imaginary community – a space where symbolic boundaries and myths preserved a sense of white, male working-classness (Spracklen, 2016; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2020).

Methods

This research started with the first announcement that the Conservative were targeting Workington Man in the national media at the end of October 2019. We started to monitor the media and the rugby league websites one hour every evening from this point until 12 December, the day of the General Election. Our choice of websites came from our own

⁶ This did not apply in South Wales or Gloucester, where rugby union was supported and played by working-class people.

informed insider understanding of where rugby league fans lurk, and our own understanding of how newspapers online create enormous amounts of content below-the-line. As informed insiders, we know the rugby league press, and this is why we read *Forty-20*. Our decision to read the article on *The Guardian* website and the comments-below-the-line was pragmatic: when we saw Collins had written it, we knew it would generate debate. Our analysis of the data uses Discourse Tracing (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009) to make sense of the micro, meso and macro discourses at work in the news, below-the-line and in the fan forums. This methodology is well-suited to an analysis of how digital networks are spaces where identity, community and ideology are constructed and contested (Spracklen, 2020a, 2020b). We started the data collection and the Discourse Tracing simultaneously, mapping each level (micro, meso, macro) against our Bourdieusian framework. We are confident that the rugby league journalists are who they say they are. We are aware that we are not sure that these are genuine rugby league fans in the north of England – or indeed genuine readers of *The Guardian* – but these users are performing these roles in these online spaces. If they are bots or agitators or rugby union fans pretending to be something else, they certainly perform authentically (Spracklen and Spracklen, 2020).

Analysis

Tony Collins and Rugby League Journalists

On Friday 01 November 2020, sports historian and well-known commentator on rugby league, Tony Collins⁷, wrote the opinion piece titled ‘Rugby league is a rebel sport – its northern strongholds will never turn Conservative’ that framed the rest of the debate below-the-line, as we will show (Collins, 2019). In this opinion piece, Collins explored how rugby league had split from rugby union, how it expressed working-class authenticity, how its clubs and towns rejected elitism. He suggested that rugby league’s history of being the sport of the ant-Establishment resistance in working-class areas up north was proof that its fans and towns could never turn to the Conservatives. He then argued that (Collins, 2019):

Rugby league communities have been devastated by deindustrialisation, austerity and government policies over the past 30 years. Half of the English teams in the Super League come from areas that are in the most deprived 10% in Britain. Workington

⁷ We have already cited his work. Collins has written the book on the history of rugby league, as well as rugby union (Collins, 1999, 2006, 2015). He is a fan activist and journalist as well as an academic.

itself has lost its coal and steel industries... Workington Man (Johnson's consultants appear to be ignorant of the fact that women are also rugby league fans and players) has none of the advantages of living in the economic bubble of the south of England. While dissatisfaction with Labour also runs deep, it is unlikely that traditional rugby league areas in the north of England will fall to the Tories.

The only rugby league periodical to pick up on the claim about Workington Man in the period of our research was the independently published *Forty20*, a magazine aimed at rugby league fans who want to read more than just match reports or news of players signings (like the two weekly rugby league newspapers that continue to be sold across the north of England): fans who wish to demonstrate their own cultural capital of the field and network of rugby league (Bourdieu, 1986; Ibrahim, 2015; Ibrahim and Roberts, 2018).⁸ In the November 2019 edition its editorial mentioned that (Hannan, 2019, p. 3):

There was a patronising assertion that the coming general election will be won in the “rugby league towns” of the north of England... Tory success in attracting white men without degrees, aka “Workington Man” will determine whether that party gets a majority, think tank Onward argued.

The editorial then continued to cite Tony Collins, combining the title of *The Guardian* think-piece, with a paraphrase, saying that he had wrote: ‘Rugby league is a rebel sport... resistance is in its DNA.’ In the same edition of the magazine, Martin Kelner's (2019, p. 50) amusing end-column was titled ‘Constituent prats’, where he re-hashed Collins's argument and suggested that if Jacob Rees-Mogg turned up for the best fish and chips in Maryport, the old Roman fort just north of Workington, then “Moggy will quickly discover why the whole Workington Man thing might be the most flawed concept anybody has posited.” Kelner, himself a professional journalist who has worked for the BBC and *The Guardian*, went on to finish that while he believed people in Workington were angry at being “neglected and ignored by London”, he believed that the Tories would not be able turn Workington man because the Tories did not bother to know or care about towns like it.

⁸ There is another monthly magazine, *Rugby League World*. This did not mention the debate about Workington Man, though it did mention approvingly that the owner of Huddersfield Giants had stood in the election: for the Conservatives.

*Below-the-Line*⁹

There were 641 comments below-the-line by the end of our data collection.¹⁰ Many pointed out how they, and of course Collins himself, may well not be typical rugby league fans, and perhaps their views would differ from most fans. These fans believed themselves to be authentic because they shared the same cultural capital as most of the working-class fans in the north of England, but they recognised they had different habitus to those fans (Bourdieu, 1986). These fan-posters wanted to show – or rather, to perform – that were still part of rugby league’s community and field, but they also wanted to point out they were middle-class identity liberals (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020) who were no longer fully embedded in that habitus.

Awareness of the social and historical issues around the game – the field’s habitus and the cultural capital needed to become part of the it (Bourdieu, 1986; Ibrahim, 2015; Ibrahim and Roberts, 2018) - were used in occasional arguments in the comments. Many held positive views of rugby league supporters and the communities even when Brexit or the subject of Workington Man arose to which they disagreed with. Bangorstu (posted 01 November 2019, 16:11) said:

Well at least we agree on that!

It will be very interesting to see how these Labour but Leave constituencies fall. Will Labour but Leave voters really want Brexit enough to vote Conservative? Or will they go BXP? Or was Leave just a protest vote that is never going to be heeded and these voters revert to Labour? Interesting times....

Voting intention in the 2019 General Election was the largest issue discussed with Brexit and the 2016 Referendum closely behind although many posts overlapped, most comments regarding these issues made reference to the similarities of the issues around both. For example, Apomorph (posted 01 November 2019, 14:33) said:

However, they voted in 2016, I doubt too many Rugby League fans will be duped into voting for the Conservative and Rugby Unionist Party.

⁹ All comments found below-the line at Collins (2019) and accessed 08 December, 2019, by which date comments had been closed.

¹⁰ Our long-standing engagement in these spaces allow us to estimate the normal number of comments under the rugby league articles never rises beyond 50.

This poster has made a pun by re-naming the Conservative Party to be the party of the Rugby Football Union as well as the Union: rugby union is argued here to be sport of the southern English Establishment, its cultural capital hard-wired into its hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Occasionally some commentators offered some personal and honest thoughts of being not totally convince either way (JakeChoir, posted 01 November 2019, 22:52):

As for my views, I'm one of the vanishing few who thought neither leave nor remain would change much in our lives, but on balance, leaving means the UK isn't taking the chance on what Europe might or might not become, for better or for worse. Nothing in the last three years has changed my view.

The research carried out by Onward was criticised by many posters who agreed with Collins and extended his critique. These pointed out that rugby league existed beyond the north of England¹¹ and had expanded into universities where students from all classes took up the sport. As students are identified by Sobolewska and Ford, 2020 as conviction identity liberals – progressive, supportive of diversity and firmly against nationalism and populism - some of the posters argued that these student rugby-league fans would return home and vote Labour. They believed that these would work through their networks to persuade anyone at home to reject the hegemony of populism by reminding them of the anti-Conservative working-class habitus and cultural capital of rugby league (Bourdieu, 1986; Ibrahim, 2015; Ibrahim and Roberts, 2018).

Incognitokipper (posted 01 November 2019, 14:29) agreed with Collins that Onward ignored women in rugby league, but challenged Collins for lack of evidence:

'Johnson's consultants appear to be ignorant of the fact that women are also rugby league fans and players

While this is an undeniable fact, it is also one of those Guardian type facts that scoots over the underlying numbers (and therefore the basis from which a sensible conclusion can be drawn) in favour of making a Guardian type point.'

¹¹ A professional team has existed in London since 1980, and there are rugby league clubs in almost every English county.

Others mentioned both a lack of understanding of the modern game with higher participation of woman players, volunteers and fans. Some implied it was an example of an oversight, the lack of understanding of the modern game which could cost the Conservatives votes. These were attempts to highlight their cultural capital by being aware of the gender changes within the field of rugby league and wider society (Melnick and Wann, 2011; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2020).

Posts regarding Brexit noted the obvious number of rugby league towns who voted Leave like Wigan, and those few who voted Remain, as Leeds did. Some posts took issue with the idea that Brexit was the fault of the north of England. Harryflashman (posted 01 November 2019, 16:04) said:

Workington Man rests on the falsehood that the north is responsible for Brexit. 52% of the Leave vote was in the south of England. I know many people in the south feel utter contempt for those of us in the north (especially those who used to be northerners) but they should really look to their own backyard, especially the Tory shires, before blaming the rest of the country for the mess we are in.'

Another interesting counter-claim was the argument that people in the north of England vote to Leave as an act of rebellion against the elites, a rebellion that would not mean those voters forgot the historical damage caused by the Conservatives. Ghost of Keynes (posted 01 November 2019, 14:35) said:

In targeting 'Warrington Man' the Tories reveal their abject misunderstanding of life outside the home counties. He might have voted for the first time ever, but he did that in part to kick the Government of the day a kick in the nuts: in case you forgot, that Government was Tory. And a lot of otherwise loyal Labour voters also voted Leave for precisely the same reasons. The deeply condescending idea that folk in these 'left behind' towns and cities failed to see who had imposed austerity on them and were happy to blame it on Europe is for the birds. They just wanted to kick arrogant Tory posh boys in the knackers. The Tories fatal error - having failed to scrape more than 40 per cent of the vote together for the last two decades was to seize on the '52 per cent' as an instant, off-the-shelf majority. The 52 per cent voted Leave for a hundred different reasons, and whichever way you look at it, they ain't all going to vote for the Tories. Add the millions of moderate Remain-leaning Tories who think Johnson is an

oik or a chancer and his chances of gaining an overall majority look pretty thin. The Tories will scrape through as the biggest party if they're looking, but after the DUP experience, who is going to even contemplate an alliance with him - except perhaps the Demented Frog Farage. That's the Tories biggest failure - they believe their own hype and - sometimes it works. This time, it definitely won't.

The Brexit postings showed some sympathy with the reasons why some rugby league fans voted Leave, whilst not agreeing with them, in most cases totally opposing them. Others, however, said that many rugby league fans, and people in many northern rugby league heartlands had already embraced the Conservative Party. These people were happy to see Conservative populism adopted into the myths, the habitus and field of rugby league (Bourdieu, 1986) – resisting globalization and hegemony (1971), while protecting the local and the free choice of the individual. tiojo (02 November 2019, 11.06) said:

It seems the author is living in the past. Things have already changed. Just look at the Copeland constituency based on the rugby league playing town of Whitehaven. It is represented by a Tory MP. The reason? Neglect and complacency by the Labour party and trade unions. The era of coal mines, steel mills and organised labour that characterised the town in the past is long gone. The unions and the Labour party have failed to represent the interests of those working in the sectors of mass employment of today in the service sector. They have done nothing for those on minimum wage and zero hours contracts. Previous Labour governments did nothing to reform anti trade union laws. They took steps to distance themselves for their main supporters and funders in the unions frightened off by headlines in the Daily Mail. There are now no such things as 'Labour heartlands'.

Against this were comments that cited different ideas as to why rugby league could be called a rebel sport: the game's foundation and the long exclusion from the mainstream media, bans for life for people who played rugby league from rugby union clubs, and French rugby league being banned by Vichy during the Second World War. This historical myth-making while was just evidence of how some fan-posters saw the history of their game: they could not imagine that a game with this habitus of counter-hegemonic resistance (Ibrahim, 2015; Ibrahim and Roberts, 2018) could be used in a successful campaign to win seats in rugby-league towns.

RLfans.com

There were three discussion threads on rlfans.com discussing politics, which we analyse in turn here under sub-titles taking their name from the title of the thread: ‘Voting Intentions’; ‘Brexit Anyone? (part 4)’; and ‘General Election campaign’. As the latter two were huge in number we restricted our analysis to the comments in the last four pages of threads (with up to ten on each page), just to see what rugby league fans were saying in the weeks before the election.

Voting Intentions

This thread, including a poll, was started by the user Cronus on 09 December 2019.¹² As of 09:46 on 12 December, the voting intentions were Labour 2, Conservative 1, and Green 1, and 12 users had commented. At this point, it seems like the average fan-user on this forum was more likely to be identity liberal than identity conservative (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Cronus started the poll and thread at 13:20 by saying: ‘I fully expect a lefty dominated result here, but let’s see how close we are to the result on Thursday’. Only right-wing people call people on the left ‘lefty’ (Moffitt, 2016), so it is obvious from this opening (and from other statements below) that Cronus is right-wing, Conservative-supporting and populist: a clear example of what Sobolewska and Ford (2020) identify as identity conservative. Cronus’ statement was copied by IR80, who responded at 16:28:

Of course it will lean left, it’s a RL forum, not an audience known for thinking beyond ‘I’ve always voted Labour, all my family always have. I believe anything I am told to believe.’. But, fortunately the country aren’t all RL followers.

This was pounced on by sally cinnamon, who sarcastically said on 11 December 2019 at 08:21:

Let me guess, you’re someone who ‘gets’ northern working class communities and leave voters and doesn’t patronise them or think they can’t think for themselves, unlike the metropolitan liberal Labour types who only understand Islington....

¹² <https://forums.rlfans.com/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=627061>, accessed 12 December 2019.

This is the nearest we can see to a reference to the original research on Workington Man. A majority of others also responded by saying they will vote Labour or Liberal Democrat because they did not like the populist turn of the Tories and the long years of austerity under their rule. On 11 December at 20:55, Steph Curry responded:

Labour because I care about the country and my child's future and because I'm not a "love beer, love enger-lund, hate isis"uneducated gammon

Brexit Anyone? (part 4)

As the title indicates, this was the fourth part of a long-running thread about Brexit.¹³ This fourth part was set up on 16 May 2019 after the third part had reached its limit. There is no reference to Workington Man, and most of the posters were obviously taking extreme positions on the merits of Brexit. The identity conservative Cronus, for example, posted on 08 November 2019 at 22:58:

I really do wonder about the most ardent and devoted Labourites. If you believe in the same extreme and anti-UK/capitalism/West ideologies Corbyn and McDonnell have advocated all their lives (but have watered down in the face of increased scrutiny and in an attempt to appeal to all sides), fair enough. If you're anything else, you're a puppet and a muppet and need to give your head a wobble.

This was responded to by bren2k, who alleged that the 'MSM' had been 'supine' over the suppression of the report into Russian interference in Brexit (11 November, 09:49). He/she then claimed as well that Russians were 'funding the Tory party' (11 November 2019: 15:35). That said, some posters seemed willing to find compromise. On 10 December at 17:10, wrencat1973 suggested that:

Right now, we have Boris making promises that we just know that he wont keep and Corbyn promising to spend every last penny and then some. However, we have to get through Brexit before any of us have a clue just what may be available for either party to spend.

¹³ <https://forums.rlfans.com/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=623526>, accessed 12 December 2019.

General Election campaign

This thread was started on 27 August 2019.¹⁴ In the four pages and thirty-six posts we reviewed covering 28 November to 12 December, the divide between identity liberals and identity conservatives continued to be carved. These fans were claiming ownership of the networks and field of rugby league through their opposing claims about the habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Ibrahim, 2015; Ibrahim and Roberts, 2018)) - and their own interpretations about who would win. On 09 December at 15:35, Scarlet Pimpernel suggested that Boris Johnson was an ‘embarrassment’ who acting ‘strange’ through his refusal to ‘grilled’ by the media. In reply on the same day 1t 16:13, Sal Paradise replied:

It seems to me the press are reacting to the accusation of Tory bias - all I have heard today is anti-Tory pro Labour. In the NHS how many people were treated perfectly well - you can always find exceptions if you really look hard enough. On Brexit it is no surprise leaks are coming out - 95% of all government civil servants voted remain - this is their last gasp effort to avoid leaving and having to up front and central.

Then on 11 December at 22:33, Cronus worried about the result for his/her own team:

Squeaky bum time for some... I’m seeing a huge volume of anti-Labour language on local (mostly traditional Labour) community social media sites - even a massive Labour seat like Leigh is balanced on a knife edge, and in the last few days has swung to a predicted Tory win. But it depends where those ex-Labour votes go - split them between Tory and BP and Labour take it. Plus you could stick a red rosette on a turd in some seats like Wigan and Labour would still win.

Sal Paradise and Cronus worried about the Labour/liberal/EU bias in the media and the old patterns of anti-Tory prejudice in white, working-class places like Wigan and Leigh. This led King Street Cat to post, on 12 December at 07:11:

Genuine question. How many of those posts do you think are honest, genuine posts, and how many of them do you think are sock puppet accounts? ... Go on twitter now and see how many single mothers are voting Tory for the first time, then look at the

¹⁴ <https://forums.rlfans.com/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=625759>, accessed 12 December 2019.

date they joined twitter. I can guarantee they all joined in November 2019. Also, have a look at how many lifelong Labour voters are apparently scared of the security risk Corbyn poses, therefore they'll be voting Tory for the first time. It's playing on the weak, the vulnerable, the frightened, and the confused. See how it works?

For this person, news of the Labour Red Wall across the north collapsing was deliberate misinformation. He/she felt confident these people could not vote Conservative.

Discussion

The comments below-the-line in *The Guardian*, and the wider debates on rlfans.com, show the complexity of how rugby league fans – and others – measured the game and its towns in the run-up to the UK General Election. For Collins and the journalists at *Forty-20* magazine, Workington Man was constructed from a partial understanding of the cultural capital and habitus that formed the Bourdieusian networks (Bourdieu, 1986, Ibrahim, 2015; Ibrahim and Roberts, 2018) of rugby league: its communities, its myths, and relationship to the white, working-class towns of the north of England (Spracklen, 2016). Collins was seemingly correct in his scepticism about this misappropriation of the symbolic identity of rugby league and its imagined, imaginary community (Spracklen, 2016). Most of the posters below-the-line too had no doubt that rugby league fans would not be fooled by the brash populism of Johnson and the Conservatives. The Conservative Party, as one respondent suggested, is the Conservative Rugby Unionist Party. Elites use their hegemonic power to ensure their interests become hegemonic support in popular culture (Gramsci, 1971): opera not drill; rugby union not rugby league; new trains in London and the Home Counties not the post-industrial towns of the north of England. Rugby league has never been part of the cultural capital of the elites in this country (Bourdieu, 1986). So posters believed rugby league fans would use their agency and their habitus within the game to resist voting for the party of the elites.

Some posters, however, questioned whether Collins may be seeing the idea of rebellion differently to many rugby league fans, who viewed voting for Brexit opposing an established order as a form of counter-hegemonic resistance: a notion put about by the Leave campaign and personalities connected with it (Fox, 2020). Some argued that the idea of rugby league supporters having rebel DNA only applied if viewed nostalgically, or by using examples from France and its banning of the game under the Vichy Government. Optimistically some people made assumption that people would not vote for a ruling party because of the rebellion in their DNA which echoed Collins. Of those that held this view,

some did dissent from the idea of rebellion and cited other factors - local issues, tribal politics, or simply a seat being a safe seat, which of course in some cases proved to be less safe in 2019. Discussions of gender did not cover ideas surrounding populism - and its base the white working-class male (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2017; Kammers, 2017) - although some posters mentioned that the use of *man* in Workington Man was a deliberate attempt to make the Bourdieusian field (1986) of rugby league a space for the contestation and construction of hegemonic masculinity (Spracklen and Spracklen, 2020). Disagreement with the article regarding voting intention, whatever the posters' personal views or hopes for outcomes, was essentially driven by two key claims. First, the vote for Leave had already signalled that many voters in these rugby-league towns were indeed identity conservatives (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Second, the demographics in these Red Wall towns were changing, as new middle-class home-owners moved in to the new estates built where the mines and mills had been (Fox, 2020).

For the posters on rlfans.com there was a combination of disbelief – that towns like Workington would ever vote Conservative – combined with the fear that the Conservatives were indeed persuading voters to switch. The aftermath of the Brexit Referendum and the on-going politics over leaving the EU saw some posters sensing a populist turn in their local communities. And others – Cronus and Sal Paradise - already embraced the populist turn and were proud to publicly express right-wing views about Brexit and the General Election. For these rugby league fans, Labour had become irrelevant to them and the communities in which they lived and voted. Labour was the party of the Remain Establishment, the metropolitan civil servants and the national media. These fans saw no difference between voting Leave and being a rugby league fan: both were constructed out of myths of anti-Establishmentarianism, waving a finger at Brussels and the BBC, or waving a finger at Twickenham and London. Like so many of the rugby league voters who did go out to vote on the day of the election, they thought voting Conservative as an act of counter-hegemonic resistance (Gramsci, 1971), something authentic in their ideology - and their habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) - as worthy as the Split the Northern Union made with Twickenham in 1895 (Spracklen, 2016). These Conservative-voting rugby league fans were challenged by the progressive fans on the forum, who saw their own form of the game's cultural capital as the correct one (Bourdieu, 1986; Ibrahim, 2015; Ibrahim and Roberts, 2018). There is evidence here that there remained a significant proportion of fans using the forum were going to vote Labour. These fans believed they were the authentic inheritors of the Split, and that progressive politics today was an embrace of rugby league's rebel roots. Both sets of fans used the forum as a Bourdieusian

field or network (Ibrahim, 2015), in which they each believed they had the freedom to express their opinions in a way that was unconstrained by outside power or control. Both sets of fans believed they were the true inheritors or owners of rugby league's history of counter-hegemonic resistance, individualism and freedom. But both sides suspected the other set of not playing fair or being brainwashed by the media or by propaganda (Coady, 2019). All these fans then, were trying to convince the other fans that they were the authentic voice of rugby league. That is, each fan online was trying to perform authentically as a rugby-league fan, while simultaneously contesting other fan attempts to perform that identity (Millward, 2012; Reinhard, 2018; Sandvoss, 2004; Spracklen, 2016; Spracklen, 2020b; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2020).

Conclusion

In the 2019 UK General Election, the Conservatives, the party of the British Establishment and business, continued to maintain their electoral success. As we have shown, they took town seats with rugby-league clubs across the north of England, as part of their wider assault on the Red Wall. This is incredible, if not surprising, given the rise of populist politics and the large number of people in these towns who are identity conservatives (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Furthermore, there has been a long period where such policies have become normalised in the media (Fox, 2020; Kemmers, 2017). But a large part of the vote swapped to the Conservatives because these individuals believed they were being anti-Establishment, counter-hegemonic. The rugby league fans in our research believed voting Conservative and for Leave in 2016 was an act of resistance, even as other rugby league fans believed no rugby league town would ever vote for the Right. Have rugby league fans, rugby league people, ever been really that rebellious, or have they always been naturally conservative? Or was the rebel act voting for Brexit, and voting Conservative in Labour heartlands? We can see that the rugby league communities have clearly changed, as new and younger voters have changed the demographics. Crucially, in towns like Workington it is the white men in work who left school early, who are identity conservatives, strong on patriotism, not the more international, younger identity liberals in these towns in smaller numbers, who tipped the balance to the Conservatives (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). While rugby league is not just a man's sport, its culture and institutions reflect the world dominated by white middle-aged men (Spracklen and Spracklen, 2020). Does rugby league even consider an opportunity to find new fans and players among delivery workers in cities or those service-sector workers on zero hours contracts in more multi-cultural cities? The answer, sadly, is no. Rugby league

fans and the people who run rugby league are quite happy to remain a sport played in the small towns of small parts of the north of England. It is time for the sport, and its fans, to be honest and move on from its foundation story that reflected, we can hope, the best thinking of rugby league folk of that era, and rethink rugby league's habitus, identity and community, and what is considered the right cultural capital, to reflect the diversity of many communities of England. The Conservatives and Onward clearly noticed the communities in the north of England had changed before rugby league writers did, but of course this populism is based on a generation who are dying out: the older white identity conservatives who did not go to University, who also watch rugby league in these towns. We will have to wait to see if progressive parties might challenge populism at the ballot box, but we know younger people are more cosmopolitan (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). We also know the towns and cities of the north of England are becoming more multicultural (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020) – so there may be an opportunity for rugby league itself to prosper with a new younger, more diverse fanbase.

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