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To cite this article: James Morrison (2025) Decay, 'Dependency' and Deindustrialisation: The Evolving Discourse of 'The Left Behind', Javnost - The Public, 32:4, 521-538, DOI: [10.1080/13183222.2025.2579391](https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2025.2579391)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2025.2579391>



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Published online: 24 Nov 2025.



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DECAY, 'DEPENDENCY' AND DEINDUSTRIALISATION: THE EVOLVING DISCOURSE OF 'THE LEFT BEHIND'

James Morrison

This article examines the conceptual evolution of a defining trope of the UK's Brexit era: "the left behind". Widely used today as discursive shorthand for marginalised post-industrial places and populations, the term "left behind" was popularised to describe older white working-class voters alienated from mainstream politics and susceptible to right-wing populism. It has since become a floating signifier for competing conceptions of social inequality. The Left has mobilised it as a counter-hegemonic signifier for socio-economic and socio-political marginalisation seen to affect areas scarred by deindustrialisation. The Right has weaponized it as a synonym for values cherished by such communities – arguing that these have been socio-culturally marginalised by latter-day mores promoted by metropolitan global elites. But prior to its conceptual capture by political scientists seeking to explain the resurgence of nativist politics, earlier iterations of the "left behind" concept had begun circulating in the language of press and Parliament. Drawing on critical discourse analysis of Hansard and newspaper from the years between the formation of Britain's post-crash Coalition government and the 2016 EU referendum, the article traces the early emergence of "left-behind" narratives in discursive practices spotlighting problematic social groupings: othered communities scarred by "worklessness", underachievement and "dependency" on social protection.

KEYWORDS left behind; marginalisation; floating signifier; hegemony; post-industrial; workless

Introduction: Conceptualising and Situating Britain's "Left Behind"

Media and political debates in the UK have been heavily preoccupied in recent years by the socioeconomic and other characteristics of a vividly labelled, but hazily defined, group – seen as disproportionately affected by social inequality: "the left behind". The concept of a distinctively British post-industrial "left behind", concentrated in regions that had endured decades of deindustrialisation, under-investment and weak political representation since the 1970s and early 1980s, was popularised through the work of political scientists Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin in their 2014 book *Revolt on the Right*. In it, they applied the label "left behind" to "older, less skilled and less well-educated working-class voters" susceptible to the appeal of right-wing populist political parties (Ford and Goodwin 2014, 10). This association with members of a traditional, post-industrial working-class that had come to feel politically and culturally alienated, partly (if not wholly) due to their *socio-economic*

marginalisation by unregulated global market forces and distant, unresponsive political elites, was also highlighted in a near-contemporaneous report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) think-tank. The IPPR argued that up to two-thirds of what it termed Britain's "white working class" had come to feel "left behind' by politics" and, as a result, no longer believed "democracy works for them" (Griffith et al. 2014).

Since then, the term "left behind" has largely been applied – by academics, politicians and the media – as a sociological shorthand for the various forms of social inequality seen to disproportionately afflict peripheral and/or post-industrial areas and communities. Particular attention has been paid to deindustrialised areas and/or coastal towns that have been adversely impacted by changes in the economy, labour market, public services and social security associated with neoliberalism and globalisation (e.g. Becker, Fetzner, and Novy 2017; Hobolt 2016). In addition, the term "left behind" has lately been deployed more globally, with scholars noting its application to the blue-collar/rust-belt rebellion seen to have first propelled Donald Trump to the White House (e.g. Alden 2017; Bhambra 2017; Birnbaum 2018) and populist political currents attracting people feeling "left behind" by "interpersonal and interterritorial inequality" across Europe and beyond (Rodríguez-Pose, Terrero-Dávila, and Lee 2023, 951).

Specifically in the run-up to and aftermath of the UK's 2016 European Union referendum, and during the 2017 and 2019 general elections, "the left behind" provided a touchstone around which both Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party and Boris Johnson's Conservatives built campaign narratives (e.g. Hossein-Pour 2019). The latter's (ultimately temporary) capture from Labour of dozens of post-industrial seats widely dubbed the "red wall" in December 2019 (Kanagasooriam and Simon 2021) led to a victorious Johnson promising a post-election "levelling up" legislative agenda (gov.uk 2019, 12). This pledged to address widening socio-economic and socio-political inequalities between the prosperous South-East and "left-behind" areas of northern England, Wales and the Midlands through a combination of belated infrastructural investment and enhanced regional devolution. Johnson's discursive appropriation of the "red-wall" working class also informed his ministers' subsequent rhetorical pledges to initiate a "war on woke" to protect the supposed silent majority of socio-cultural conservatives with which they were elided from the erasure of their cherished traditional values and the imposition of liberal cosmopolitan mores – including openness to largescale immigration (Payne and Wright 2020).

In such ways, the "left-behind" concept came to be mobilised as a counter-hegemonic floating signifier for various competing (if, at times, overlapping) forms of social inequality. Its discursive pliability allowed it to be appropriated by political actors on both Left and Right as a rhetorical prism through which to critique the dominant norms and power structures of which they ideologically disapproved (e.g. neoliberal political economy, "woke" cultural mores and/or emasculating political and bureaucratic frameworks) – in ostensible defence of communities these forces had disadvantaged.

But how did "left-behind" discourse originate in the UK context – at least in its most recent iteration, as a defining discursive trope of what might be termed the Brexit era? Drawing on critical discourse analysis of parliamentary records and articles in the print and online press, this paper attempts to trace the emergence of this linguistic motif for social inequality in media and political discourse in the years leading up to the 2016 referendum, unpacking its rhetorical and conceptual evolution over this time.

In excavating these discursive tap-roots, we conceptualise the "left-behind" motif as a signifier of social inequality in the Gramscian tradition: that is, as a distinctly class-oriented

construction of unequal power relations. In his theory of hegemony, Antonio Gramsci envisioned hegemony as the processes by which one social class becomes (and seeks to remain) "dominant and ruling" (1971, 57). This paper argues that the concept of "the left behind" is best understood today as a *counter-hegemonic* class-oriented discursive imaginary, based on its repeated mobilisation as a critique of unequal socio-economic, socio-political and/or socio-cultural conditions endured by (legacy) working-class communities by UK media and political actors. These include those, like Johnson and Reform UK leader Nigel Farage, whose own class interests would be adversely impacted by any meaningful effort to "level up".

The Post-Brexit "Left-Behind" Debate: Evolving Definitions and Imaginaries

As the "left-behind" concept became a locus for UK debates around social inequality in the years immediately encompassing the 2016 "Brexit" vote, this paper is concerned with the question of how its usage originated and evolved in the run-up to that period. To this end, this section provides an overview of the state of existing research into the term and its associations, across academic, NGO and government literature.

The most enduring popular conceptualisation of Britain's "left behind" remains that offered by Ford and Goodwin's now seminal 2014 book diagnosing the political, cultural and economic currents underpinning the rise of Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP): the campaigning force that propelled the country towards the 2016 Brexit vote that ended its 40-year membership of the European Union, but which was later surpassed by Reform UK. Ford and Goodwin identified an "ageing, shrinking and left-behind, white working class" characterised by small-c conservative "social attitudes" that viewed an increasingly "cosmopolitan, multicultural and globalised Britain as an alien and threatening place" (2014, 132). The nexus of economic disadvantage and cultural disaffection they identified – often expressed through hostility towards immigration and multiculturalism – was more widely popularised a year later, in journalist David Goodhart's bestselling *The Road to Somewhere*. In it, Goodhart juxtaposed two seemingly incompatible "tribes" inhabiting post-millennial Britain: a younger, mobile and de-situated, university-educated (and often urban-based) middle class – "Anywheres" – versus older, provincial, frequently less formally educated "Somerwheres", to whom "group identity, tradition and national social contracts" were of pre-eminent importance (Goodhart 2017, 5). These asserted cultural values – neatly articulated as "faith, flag and family" – were echoed three years later in the similarly alliterative trio of "pride, place and patriotism" Deborah Mattinson identified in *Beyond the Red Wall*, her focus group-based dissection of the factors motivating former Labour Party voters to abandon it for the Tories in 2019 (2020, 71), and, in due course, Goodwin's own *Values, Voice and Virtue* (2023).

A more nuanced, tangible definition of what it means for *communities* (not just voters) to be "left behind" appeared in a 2019 report by the Local Trust charity. This identified a range of socioeconomic measures beyond annually published government indices of deprivation or unemployment claimant counts that, occurring in combination, were seen to characterise "left-behind" areas. These included poor connectivity, weak infrastructure and the absence of a developed civil society to articulate (and potentially address) local concerns (Local Trust 2019, 4–5). This analysis formed the blueprint for subsequent

interventions in this debate, including the remit of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for “Left-Behind” Neighbourhoods and five “dimensions of left-behindness” identified in Morrison’s monograph *The Left Behind*, based on thematic analysis of interviews with individuals from post-industrial geographies in England, Wales and Scotland (2022a, 204–5). In addition to “degradation of work” (lack of jobs, precarious and falling wages) and “erosion of place” (decaying infrastructure and lack of regeneration), these dimensions also included unresponsive hegemonic authorities, in the form of local, regional, national (and, previously, EU) governing elites (2022a).

Morrison’s systematic analysis of evolving depictions of “the left behind” in the UK press and Parliament during the “intra-Brexit” years (2016–2019) also showed a clear dominance of portrayals framing them as *economically* – rather than politically or culturally – marginalised (2022a, 98). This dominance of economic frames during the immediate “life-cycle” of Brexit – the period between the referendum and its resolution – contrasts starkly with the more recent and ongoing preoccupation of right-wing commentators and some academics (e.g. Goodwin 2023; Kaufmann 2022) with “culture-war” readings. These foreground “the left behind’s” aversion to (supposedly) hegemonic latter-day liberal social attitudes and susceptibility to the political lure of authoritarian “national populism” (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). However, the fact that such competing readings are plausible further bolster arguments conceptualising the “left-behind” motif as a discursively pliable “floating signifier”: one operationalised by politicians and pundits on the Left to foreground its associations with socio-economic and/or political inequality, and those on the Right to align themselves with its (conservative) socio-cultural/political dimensions (Morrison 2022a, 102–4). As with other influential studies – and popular stereotypes they sometimes echo (and fuel) – the Local Trust report identified a concentration of “left-behind” areas in the post-industrial North and coastal areas of southern England. It also emphasised how this was particularly “a phenomenon of post-war social housing estates on the peripheries of cities and towns” and “predominantly white populations”: communities that (it asserted) had not “traditionally been the focus of debate about deprivation”, which “tended to be multicultural and based in city centres” (Local Trust 2019, 5).

Conversely, one critique of this (still largely hegemonic) “left-behind thesis” is that it disproportionately *privileges* the white working-class(es) over disadvantaged people of colour, by *over-emphasising* inequities affecting the former – at times to the exclusion of other economically disadvantaged groups, including working-class people experiencing “intersectional” inequalities relating to race and/or gender (Crenshaw 1989). A 2019 report by racial equality think-tank the Runnymede Trust highlighted how, “rather than the ‘white working class’ and ‘ethnic or migrant working class’ living different or separate lives”, there was “significant overlap” in the “everyday lived experiences” of these groups. These included “a shared experience” of “precariousness” in housing, welfare and work, and “race and class prejudice and contempt” (Snoussi and Mompelat 2019, 4). Such interventions rightly contested a suggestion implicit in many earlier contributions to the “left-behind” debate: that Britain’s legacy industrial working class was homogenously white.

Beyond the critical race literature, there have also been other notable critiques of the term “left behind”. Some view it as the latest iteration in a long continuum of stigmatising labels attached to people experiencing poverty – often as discursive tools to displace blame for material disadvantage onto those it affects (see Golding and Middleton 1982; Morrison 2019). Such discourses of the “deserving” versus “undeserving poor” stretch from Medieval images of “sturdy beggars” via centuries of poor law discourse to the late

twentieth century imaginary of “the underclass” (Welshman 2013) and Tony Blair’s othering imaginary of a marginalised, estate-bound “forgotten people” (quoted in BBC News 1997). By pitting supposedly “undeserving” groups – including today’s “left-behind” “white working class ‘other’” (Haylett 2001, 365) – against the “respectable” working (and middle) classes (Mckenzie 2017, 266), media and politicians repeatedly revive prejudices that racialise lower-class “whiteness” as “culturally burdensome” (Skeggs 2004, 90).

Moreover, narratives that emphasise the existence of whole “left-behind” *areas* – constructing them as “other” to the socioeconomic (and cultural) norms of forward-marching late modern Britain – risk promoting what sociologist Loic Wacquant conceptualises as “territorial stigmatization” (Wacquant 2007). To illustrate this critique in policy terms, many areas repeatedly framed as “left behind” in media and political discourse were among those most heavily affected by COVID-19 and measures used to control it. Before the introduction of a second England-wide “lock-down” in November 2020, the UK government placed Greater Manchester, Merseyside and much of the Midlands and North-East England in “tier 3” restrictions – forcing the temporary closure of non-essential shops, restaurants, bars, performance venues and other businesses, and ordering many people to stay away from work, at a time when other areas were largely open for business. Businesses in “left-behind” areas of Wales were also repeatedly forced to close, while deprived post-industrial Scottish areas, from Dundee to North and South Lanarkshire, were placed in the highest two of five levels of COVID restrictions introduced by the Scottish Government. Areas of southern England placed in tier 3 and 4 restrictions were also largely those with (post-industrial) disadvantages making them “a little more like the north of England than other parts of the south”, according to social geographer Danny Dorling (2020). As a result of these ever-evolving configurations of national and regional policy measures, many areas that spent the longest periods in full or partial pandemic lock-downs closely corresponded with cities, towns and hinterlands previously identified as “left behind” – and in need of “levelling up” (see, for example, Davenport and Zaranko 2020; Local Trust 2019).

This leads us to the final major critique of the dominant “left-behind” narrative: the charge that its overwhelming associations with particular geographies and/or demographics (e.g. older, traditional working-class communities) limits its usefulness as a sociological category. As a growing number of scholars recognise, in a globalised world increasingly characterised by precarious, low-waged work and social atomisation, people can feel economically, politically and culturally left behind, or “left out” (Barbulescu et al. 2019; Mckenzie 2017) – *wherever* they live, *whatever* their age, and regardless of whether they identify as “working class”. Moreover, there are aspects of what might be clunkily termed “left-behindness” to various groupings recently defined by sociologists, from Guy Standing’s multicultural “precariat” (2011) to Claire Ainsley’s “new working class” (2018).

In sum, then, there exists a substantial academic, governmental and civil society literature focused on *defining* “the left behind”; *identifying* communities/areas/groups that meet these definitions; and *critiquing* both dominant and oppositional portrayals, whether by querying the term’s over-preoccupation with the white working class or its stigmatising associations. But whatever problems there may be with the term itself – and its application – there remains widespread agreement that the regional and sub-sectional forms of social inequality with which it is commonly associated are genuine. Specifically, it is widely recognised that structural inequalities relating to economic under-investment and political under-representation have disproportionately affected post-industrial,

traditionally working-class towns, coastal resorts and rural areas – especially in northern and eastern England, Wales, the Midlands and (though not always recognised in UK-wide debates) Scotland (Morrison 2022b).

How, though, did the belated identification of a grouping today known as “the left behind” – and its discursive conceptualisation in Britain’s political public sphere – come about? At what point in the years leading up to the period encompassing the EU referendum campaign, when economic, political and identarian concerns around the “white working class” were being accorded increasing political salience, did this potent imaginary crystallise – and to which sources can we trace its discursive origins?

Methodology: Tracing the Roots of “Left-Behind” discourse

This paper’s aim is to investigate the short – to medium-term discursive “tap-roots” of the “left-behind” debate: the earlier stirrings of a full-blown “left-behind” discourse that would crystallise in the months immediately leading up to the 2016 EU Brexit vote and years of post-referendum domestic political turmoil that followed. The investigation began with a series of exploratory samples from the years leading up to the 2016 referendum of two primary discursive arenas in which an economically, politically and/or culturally “left-behind” grouping had been consistently problematised in the period *succeeding* the vote (see Morrison 2022). These “discursive fields” (Ullrich and Keller 2014, 115) were the national and regional print/online press and the UK Parliament. Newspaper articles were sampled by accessing the Nexis database: the most comprehensive online archive of UK national and regional newspapers and the primary source of full-text articles used by scholars studying the content of Britain’s print and/or online press. Contributions to deliberation in the House of Commons and House of Lords were drawn from Parliament’s official verbatim online record, <https://hansard.parliament.uk>.

In focusing on these arenas, this article recognises that (at one level) the media and political fields represent two distinct institutional contexts, each with its own discrete conventions and “rules of speaking”. However, scholarship at the intersection of political communication, media studies and political science rightly emphasises how the world of politics has become increasingly “mediatized”, through its embedding of “media logics”, including the “cultural symbol systems” it uses to “construct and communicate meaning” (Marcinkowski 2014, 7) – many of them borrowed from, or exchanged with, the media realm (e.g. Hepp, Hjarvard, and Lundby 2015; Mazzoleni 1987). This article adopts the “systemic view” of mediatisation advanced by Marcinkowski (2014, 18–19), who argues that the incorporation of “media logic” into the realms of politics and wider public debate is chiefly important as “a means to an end” – that end being to generate “public attention”, which “is bound in contemporary society to media visibility”.

Sampling and analysis of both media and political datasets was conducted at two levels. A high-level inclusive search process was initially used, in order to obtain a representative overarching picture of how the “left-behind” concept was constructed (framed) *overall* across each of the two discursive fields: that is, in the arena of both Houses of Parliament on one hand and across the full spectrum of the press on the other. To ensure that the overarching newspaper sample was as representative as possible of “left-behind” discourse in the media field as a whole, the decision was taken to sample from right across the UK press market – with searches encompassing *all* titles archived on the database (both

national and regional). This approach was felt to produce a more meaningful "overall" sample from which to then select articles for detailed analysis than if filters had been applied to (for example) target specific regional papers, or to select national titles based on their broadsheet/tabloid status or Left-Right political leanings.

Once these initial overarching media and political datasets had been collected, they were first subjected to a high-level qualitative framing analysis. This approach drew on Gitlin's definition of frames as "principles of selection, emphasis and presentation" underpinning texts to present a particular "aspect of a perceived reality" as "more salient" than others (1980, 6), and Entman's emphasis on the importance of frames in promoting "a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment" for a given issue or problem (1993, 53). In this case, the analytical aim was to discern *how* the overall balance of framing across the UK press and parliamentary fields constructed "left-behind" communities and/or the condition of being "left behind" as a "problem": i.e. to what extent the dominant causal interpretation(s), moral evaluation(s) and treatment(s) for the forms of social inequality it denoted were conceived of as economic, political, cultural and/or other. The framing analysis process drew on Mayring's "inductive category formation" approach (2014, 79). This involved conducting an initial read-through of sampled items (in this case to identify broad categories of frame), prior to a more granular re-reading during which provisional groupings were refined based on fuller immersion in the data.

Following the initial high-level coding stage, smaller-scale sub-samples of newspaper articles and parliamentary interventions were then chosen for critical discourse analysis (CDA). The proportions of texts analysed from each framing category (economic, cultural, political etc) reflected the prominence of each of these frames found in the overarching samples. The CDA framework employed was Ruth Wodak's "discourse-historical approach", which seeks to draw meaning from texts by relating them to "available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the political fields in which discursive 'events' are embedded" (2001, 65). The time-frame for sampling and analysis was the period between 6 May 2010 and 23 June 2016. This commenced with the date of the general election leading to the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government headed by David Cameron – the EU-supporting prime minister whose tenure ended with his "loss" of the Brexit referendum – and the date of that plebiscite itself. In order to identify discursive interventions relevant to media and/or political conceptualisation of "the left behind", it was necessary to experiment with various keyword search combinations that would come to be associated with discussion of Britain's "left behind" in the years succeeding the referendum. The following two keyword combinations were used to construct a Hansard sample: "left behind" and "region" (54), and "left behind" and "town" (42). The number of records of parliamentary debates generated in each case (many containing multiple individual mentions of "the left behind") is given in brackets. An additional search for the combination "left behind" and "communities" produced 225 results, but it was decided to omit these from analysis as the first two searches taken together collectively produced a large enough sample of individual parliamentary interventions (statements or speeches) to provide sufficient analytical saturation.

Following manual clean-up of these individual contributions to remove false positives (e.g. ministerial contributions criticising former governments for having "left behind" problems for their successors), the total sample of relevant mentions of "left behind" and "region" was 74 and "left behind" and "town" 32 – producing a combined overall sample for analysis of 106 interventions. Nexis searches were conducted using

the same initial three keyword combinations as for Hansard. As these generated more than 10,000 UK results for each search term, the final sample for analysis was rationalised for manageability, by limiting it to the first 100 results for each search, sorted by “relevance”. Following a manual clean-up to remove false positives and duplicates, the tally of relevant Nexis results was reduced to 151.

Conspicuously, most of the earliest references in the samples to the term “left behind” as an imaginary recognisable from the literature – i.e. a state of socioeconomic and/or other marginalisation – came from politicians, particularly government ministers, whether speaking in Parliament or cited as prominent sources (definers) in news copy. This suggested a considerable degree of politics-to-media agenda-setting, as a negotiated working definition of the term initially appeared to take shape through the pronouncements of parliamentarians and local councillors, and it only started appearing *normatively* in news discourse – as a descriptor deployed by journalists themselves – a year or two into the 2010–2015 parliament. To illustrate, the term’s earliest appearance in either sample in a form recognisable from its usage in contemporary debates was in a short news story published just days into the life of the Coalition government, in which a Devon councillor warned that “rural communities” would “get left behind” if the county’s broadband infrastructure was not radically improved (Express and Echo 2010). The first use of the term in Parliament during the same period came a month later, in a contribution from then Work and Pensions Minister Chris Grayling to a Commons debate entitled “Tackling Poverty in the UK”, in which he applied it to economically “left-behind” *households* – a clear variation on the common usage (Hansard 2010a). And the first clear-cut application of the term as a generic descriptor for whole *areas* or *communities* would come from Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg later that month, when the Press Association newswire quoted him declaring that a new Regional Growth Fund would ensure that “no region or community gets left behind” (PA Media 2010).

Economic Casualties, Culture Warriors – or Something Else? Defining the Left Behind

Based on previous research into debates about the UK’s “left behind”, it had been the author’s working assumption that one category likely to emerge was that portraying them as a socio-cultural construct: i.e. a small-c conservative grouping positioned as “left behind” by the increasing normalisation of socially liberal attitudes in post-millennial Britain. However, an intriguing early observation to emerge from immersion in the 2010–2016 data-sets was that such clear-cut culturalist framings were absent – in stark contrast to the post-referendum period between 23 June 2016 and 12 December 2019 analysed elsewhere (Morrison 2022a). Instead, culturalist representations of the “left-behind” problem surfaced in just a handful of media articles, and only then in “hybrid” accounts considering it as one with both economic and cultural aspects. Significantly, these (today common-place) dimensions only started appearing in discourse towards the end of the sample period – e.g. in a 2015 *Guardian* colour feature focusing on attitudes towards rising immigration in normatively labelled “leftbehind” Peterborough (Perkins 2015).

In the end, eight final categories of frame were identified across the two samples. These were: “economic” (“left behind” by economic disadvantage); “political” (LB by political marginalisation); “hybrid” (a combined economic, cultural and/or political frame); “whole UK LB” (contributions framing Britain overall as falling behind international

Table 1.
Breakdown of frames in hansard sample by keyword search.

LB frame by search term	"Left behind" and "region"	"Left behind" and "town"	Total
Economic LB	20	19	39
Political LB	6	3	9
Hybrid LB	7	2	9
Whole UK LB	8	1	9
Whole UK but especially some regions	2	0	2
LB households	3	2	5
Intersectional LB	27	5	32
Young people LB	1	0	1
Total	74	32	106

competitors); "whole UK but especially some regions" (those framing Britain as "left behind", but some areas more than others); "households LB" (frames focusing on economic disadvantage at individual/household level, rather than for whole areas/communities); "intersectional LB" (frames spotlighting groups experiencing economic and other inequalities – e.g. relating to race, gender and/or disability); and "young people left behind" (frames foregrounding educational, employment and other disadvantages affecting youth). A breakdown of the numbers of parliamentary contributions adopting each of these frames (and their proportions of the overall sample) is given in [Table 1](#). Media frames are broken down in [Table 2](#).

From Hansard to Headlines: The "Left Behind" as Evolving Media-Political Imaginary

As previously stated, the first clear mention of social groups being "left behind" in the parliamentary sample occurred in one of several lengthy contributions by then Work and Pensions Minister Grayling to a Commons debate on "tackling poverty" in June 2010 – shortly after entering the newly formed Conservative-Lib Dem Coalition government. In a foretaste of what would become one of the new government's defining missions – its prolonged rhetorical and policy assault on Britain's supposed culture of "welfare dependency" (see Wiggan 2012, 389) – Grayling's over-lexicalized intervention drew on a melange of tropes associating "poverty and deprivation" with social ills including "addiction", "stress-

Table 2.
Breakdown of frames in nexis sample by keyword search.

LB frame by search term	"Left behind" and "communities"	"Left behind" and "town"	"Left behind" and "region"	Total
Economic	57	24	38	119
Political	1	2	2	5
Hybrid	1	1	11	13
Whole UK			1	1
households	2	1	1	4
Intersectional	3	1	4	8
young people			1	1
Total	64	29	58	151

related illnesses”, “educational failure, family breakdown” and “crime” (Hansard 2010). In so doing, it interdiscursively drew on a long continuum of Conservative thinking associating out-of-work social security recipients with a welfare-dependent “underclass”, stretching back to the “cycle of deprivation” speech delivered by “godfather of Thatcherism” Keith Joseph in 1974 (Welshman 2013) and taking in the writings of influential New Right figures like Charles Murray (1990).

Of most significance here, Grayling offered an early illustration of the anti-immigrant framing that would go on to inform the rhetorical and policy positions of politicians and parties advocating UK withdrawal from the EU, by pointedly claiming “the jobs that were created” under the preceding (Labour) government had been taken by “people entering the country from overseas”, rather than “those on benefits” – with the result that “our most deprived communities” risked being “left behind” (Hansard 2010). Intriguingly, his sketchy allusion to “the left behind” was one of several early invocations of the term (primarily by Conservatives) framing it as an *intersectional* imaginary – one eliding socio-economic disadvantage with associated/aggravating forms of inequality – rather than in the more straightforwardly economic terms that came to characterise its usage in future years. In a contribution to the same debate, fellow Conservative MP Tracey Crouch doubled down on this embryonic definition, by detailing how “inadequate health and housing, low standards of living and high unemployment continue to characterise” parts of her own constituency that had “for many years ... been left behind” (Hansard 2010).

Significantly, however, both these two early Conservative interventions adopted atypical approaches to applying an intersectional lens: while recognising interrelated aspects of inequality that could affect specific groups (and, by inference, households), they framed these largely as *individualised* problems (or failings), rather than *structural* issues. Moreover, neither speaker explicitly recognised how people could be “left behind” by *poverty* – and the need to address their basic lack of money/material resources. Again, this implicit emphasis on individualised, rather than systemic, drivers of inequality echoed a long continuum of conservative/right-wing discourse portraying poverty as a “pathological” consequence of bad personal choices and faulty individual behaviours (Morrison 2019, 65). Moreover, it strongly channelled the new government’s efforts to promote a hegemonic discourse of “welfare commonsense” pitting “workers” against “shirkers” (Jensen 2014) and promoting “welfare reform” – as they sought to contest Britain’s decades-old social security consensus by portraying “work”, not “handouts”, as the (sole) “route out of poverty” (Duncan Smith 2015).

Equally significantly, from the point that more conventionally economic conceptions of “the left behind” did start to dominate, these were initially associated less with specified neglected regions, towns or areas (as they largely would be during the post-Brexit period) than “groups” considered to be marginalised across society. In her opening contribution to an October 2011 House of Lords debate entitled “Employment”, Labour’s Baroness Prosser explicitly elided “groups which have long been left behind or marginalised” with people out of work due to unemployment or barriers created by illness or disability – wherever they happened to live (Hansard 2011b). Although her speech began with a sweeping summary of “profound change in the labour market” that had occurred since the period of 1980s mass deindustrialisation, she built up to a peroration in which she argued, imploringly, that “we cannot afford to leave great swathes of the population on the unemployment shelf” because employers were “not used to coping with disability” or “difference” (Hansard 2011b). While adopting a more structural, less

individualised, diagnosis of unemployment and barriers to work than the Conservatives, this contribution nonetheless again reflected the dominant discourse of the moment: concerns about families/households "left behind" by worklessness.

Though early parliamentary applications of the term "left behind" to particular groups may have adopted an intersectional and/or welfare-inflected focus, however, it did not take long for its discursive re-framing to begin – both in press and Parliament – as a signifier for disadvantaged post-industrial *areas/communities*. Aside from the previously mentioned article about Devon being "left behind" due to poor broadband, the earliest newspaper piece to deploy the term "left behind" was an August 2010 story in the *Gloucestershire Echo* reporting concerns of local "traders" that the "lower high street" area of Cheltenham "must not be left behind" by "multi-million pound" rejuvenation plans for the rest of the south-west English town (*Gloucestershire Echo* 2010). But perhaps the earliest primary definer in news coverage of what became (for some time) its hegemonic economic conceptualisation – as a marker of *regionalised* post-industrial disadvantage – came in an article quoting Deputy PM Clegg. His vow to "foster a thriving and more balanced economy so that no region or community gets left behind" through a new Regional Growth Fund was amplified across the regional press via a pooled newswire report published on 29 June 2010 (PA Media 2010).

This definition of "the left behind" would also be echoed in another strand of "community-empowering" Coalition discourse two years later, when Local Government Minister Grant Shapps was heavily quoted in the local press promoting a government initiative to revive faded high streets, fronted by television presenter and retail expert Mary Portas. In a lengthy quote, again replicated across several newspapers, he declared that he wanted "to know that no town is left behind" as a result of this initiative (e.g. Sweetland 2012). The coverage of both these pseudo-events – the carefully choreographed press launch of the growth fund and the unveiling of a government-driven high-street initiative fronted by a popular TV star – offers an early illustration of media logics at work in the political arena, as the "left-behind" trope became an object of two-way exchange between the two discursive fields.

The earliest *parliamentary* appearance of "left behind" as a descriptor for economically disadvantaged communities came in a speech in which Labour's then Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Rachel Reeves, lamented how "cities and towns across Britain" were "missing out on opportunities to grow and diversify their economies", and warned of "another overheating in London and the south-east" – an interdiscursive allusion to the City's complicity in the 2007–08 global financial crash (Hansard 2011a). Most significant was the binary opposition she drew between Britain's over-reliance on the banking sector and "potential powerhouses of the north of England" that were "being left behind" – a turn of phrase that would later be intertextually appropriated by Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne in his rhetorical championing of the "Northern Powerhouse" (2014). As a measure of the increasing cross-party consensus around the suitability of the term "left behind" to denote areas affected by regional inequalities, it resurfaced several times that year – including in Tory MP Brandon Lewis's description of how his own constituency, the faded east coast holiday resort of Great Yarmouth, had been "left behind" since "industry faltered through lack of support" (Hansard 2011c).

If economic framings dominated overall (with 39 parliamentary contributions and 119 media articles respectively), the next most common (36 in total) were those positioning the term as a corollary for political disaffection or a hybrid of economic, political and/or (in

one or two cases) cultural marginalisation. Once again, it was *politicians* – not journalists – who initially spearheaded this discursive re-framing. An early application of this iteration of the term “left behind” as a primarily *political*, rather than economic, imaginary surfaced in a Conservative backbencher’s contribution to a 2014 Commons debate focusing on then fledgling Coalition plans to devolve powers to new English regional combined authorities – partly as a policy corrective to existing devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Responding to a perceived bias towards major metropolitan areas, Julian Smith, MP for the Yorkshire market towns of Skipton and Ripon, asked ministers “what consideration” had been given to “the impact on the communities that will be left behind” when councils in neighbouring areas merged (Hansard 2014). Reflecting its growing usage as a descriptor for political marginalisation among local politicians, meanwhile, later that year the *Cornish Guardian* quoted a Lostwithiel town councillor demanding that his community was not “left behind when it came to devolving services” (Cornish Guardian 2014). But perhaps the single biggest discursive “moment” around which political representations of “the left behind” began multiplying (albeit often in articles adopting *hybrid* economic-political frames) was the prolonged period of public debate sparked by Chancellor Osborne’s heavily mediated announcement of plans to devolve new electoral, policy-making and financial powers to an incipient “Northern Powerhouse”. A typical example was a story in the national *i* newspaper emphasising business leaders’ concerns about their region being “left behind” due to disagreement between “civic leaders in North, West and East Yorkshire” over “how the region should be carved up” (Kirby 2016).

Of the articles and parliamentary interventions spotlighting groups “left behind” by *intersectional* disadvantages, meanwhile, a noteworthy example was a news feature in the *Birmingham Post* highlighting how housing poverty and homelessness disproportionately impacted low-income BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) people in the “Irish, African-Caribbean, Somali, Bangladeshi, Vietnamese, Chinese and Gypsy and Traveller communities” (Birmingham Post 2014). The unattributed use of the term “left-behind communities” in its main text was significant for two reasons. Firstly, this was one of the earliest media examples of the term “left behind” being applied *normatively* – i.e. by the journalist, not a quoted source. Secondly, this intersectional application of the term contrasted with emerging hegemonic definitions that overwhelmingly privileged the *white* working class in “left-behind” discourse. In this respect, it was more of a throwback to 1980s and 1990s discourses emphasising inequalities faced by Black and Asian communities identified in the Local Trust’s (2019) critique of the (alleged) historical *under*-emphasis on disadvantaged White populations – and an early foretaste of correctives to this perceived post-Brexit over-compensation by critical race scholars (notably Bhambra 2017).

Discussion: “The Left Behind” as Counter-Hegemonic Floating Signifier(s)

What all the formative references to the (or *a*) “left behind” discussed above have in common is their application of the term to (variable) groups/communities that happened to preoccupy political debate at particular points in time. Just as “left-behind” *voters* from post-industrial areas would become the dominant media-political imaginary in the run-up to and aftermath of the 2016 referendum – a period during which Leave supporters first sought to mobilise discontent among people who felt ignored by metropolitan and European elites, then both victorious Leavers and chastened Remainers scrambled to appease

(and appropriate) those voters in ensuing elections – subtly different “left-behind” imaginaries had emerged during the reign of the post-crash Coalition.

Chief among these prototype definitions, as we have seen, were out-of-work social security recipients targeted by that government’s “welfare reform” and austerity policies (see Morrison 2019). But this, more conventionally hegemonic, usage was far from the first. It is obviously beyond the scope of a single research paper to track the ultimate origin of such a widely used cultural term of reference – let alone one so descriptively vague and mutable. Nonetheless, there are strong grounds for postulating that its widespread adoption from the early 2010s as a signifier for one or more forms of social inequality (including, but not limited to that affecting former industrial/working-class communities) in part related to the recognisability, durability and pliability it had already acquired through its wider social usage, across multiple fields, beforehand.

To take a handful of examples, as early as 2001 the term had been immortalised in the title of President George W Bush’s “No Child Left Behind Act” (US Department of Education 2015), which aimed to address educational inequalities in the United States. It was later adopted, in related contexts, including by Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in Gordon Brown’s 2007–2010 Labour government – who pledged to leave “no child ... behind” as he unveiled the first “children’s plan” for England and Wales (Hansard 2007). Internationally, the term would go on to inform the wording of “principle two” of the “universal values” adopted in 2016 by the United Nations to promote its 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which pledged to “leave no one behind” (UNSCB 2017). Such examples of the term’s repeated appropriation and repurposing – albeit almost always in relation to some form of social inequality – only adds further complexity to any attempt to fully untangle exactly how it first began emerging in its most commonplace latter-day UK iteration(s).

If anything can be said with more certainty it is that the floating signification of the term “left behind” has allowed it to be repeatedly re-purposed in recent years by competing UK media and political actors to discursively align themselves with particular groups – including, latterly, their chosen imaginary of the post-industrial working-class. They do so by (re-)fashioning the term into rhetorical critiques of whatever forms of hegemony (economic, political and/or cultural) it has suited their ideologies to hold most responsible for the form(s) of social inequality on which they are focused at any particular time (Morrison 2022a).

During the immediate timeframe on which this paper focuses, the term “left behind” was initially applied to a more diffuse grouping than the situated casualties of social inequality with which it came to be associated during the post-Brexit/Trump years: erstwhile industrial/working-class communities. This earlier association was with a dispersed rump of socially disadvantaged (unemployed or economically inactive) individuals that hegemonic definers of the 2010–2015 Coalition government identified as the dominant social problem of their day. Subsequently, while the most familiar iteration of “the left behind” – as a descriptor for post-industrial socio-economic inequality – began re-orientating the discourse from a relatively early point during the sample period, after 2015 there was a significant discursive shift towards further re-defining the term to encompass socio-political alienation. In one sense, then, it was at this point that mainstream media-political discourse finally caught up with concerns about populist political forces exploiting the resentments of “left-behind” voters earlier foregrounded in *Revolt on the Right* (Ford and Goodwin 2014). Moreover, this shifting signification marked an important reversal from

hegemonic to counter-hegemonic operationalisations of the term “left behind” as the later Coalition years, and early months of the succeeding Conservative-only administration, saw the post-crash emphasis on austerity and benefit cuts dialled down. In its place came a rhetorical (and policy) turn towards promoting the devolution of power to English regions in the North and Midlands – perhaps partly in anticipation of political difficulties lying ahead in the then impending EU referendum. Throughout this process, the key social inequality focus of the moment was shifting away from *individualised* – “undeserving” – conceptions of “the left behind” (out-of-work benefit recipients) towards the “deserving” case of *structurally* disadvantaged communities.

What is equally noteworthy about the extent and limits of variation with which the term “left behind” was applied in the 2010–2016 sample analysed here is the near-total absence of its framing as a culturalist phenomenon: a signifier for groups marginalised due to their social/cultural conservatism and alienation from (supposedly) hegemonic liberal social attitudes. Though this has been a consistent characterisation of “left-behind” post-industrial working-class groups in background literature – and post-referendum media-political discourse – its virtual invisibility in this sample suggests that it was rarely directly addressed as an aspect of “left-behindness” by elected politicians or press during the years leading up to the 2016 vote. While it is beyond this paper’s scope to explain this absence, it is worth noting that the British politician most instrumental in constructing “the left behind” as an ignored cultural minority or “silent majority” (Morrison 2019, 175–176) – and the cover star of *Revolt on the Right* – was Nigel Farage, then leader of UKIP (and now of Reform UK). One partial explanation for the delay in “culture-war” frames emerging might be that, until towards the end of this period, Farage and UKIP had little or no public platform in the UK Parliament or its regional assemblies.

In any final analysis, the mutability of the “left-behind” motif must be seen to have served a singularly important discursive role in the months and years leading up to the 2016 Brexit referendum – just as it would, through its prominent place in national discourse, in those succeeding it. Today it continues to offer competing definers a singularly pliable counter-hegemonic trope: a re-sprayable badge of affinity to be worn by rival actors of Left and Right in their efforts to court voters affected by social inequality (whether constructed in economic, political or cultural terms) in this election or that referendum.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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