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Narrative, Collective Identity, and the British General Election of 2017: Corbyn, May, and the Question of 'Who We Are'.

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School of Media and Communication.

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Abstract

This study explores the role that narrative and collective identity played in the 2017 general election, with a particular focus on the campaign speeches made by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Conservative leader Theresa May. The election represented a uniquely interesting object of analysis for narrative and collective identity, namely because collective identity had become an increasingly divisive and contestable issue in Britain as a result of the Brexit referendum and the upcoming Brexit negotiations. The study draws upon the theoretical and methodological tenets of socio-narratology to present an analysis of three different aspects of the leaders' speeches: emplotment, boundaries, and characterisation. Its findings show that, contrary to expectations, the narrative contest between May and Corbyn did not simply rehash ideas of collective identity deriving from the Brexit debate. Instead, while May narrated a 'one-nation' idea of collective identity that argued for a *demos* united by a shared concern for the national-interest, sovereignty, and a 'hard' Brexit deal, Corbyn narrated a populist view of collective identity. This sought to establish the *demos* as "the many", an economic group whose experiences of austerity, inequality, and under resourced public services were caused by the "few", a wealthy, elite group of Conservative politicians and vested economic interests. Situating these findings within a wider discussion of the already available literature on the election campaign, the study hypothesises that narrative and collective identity were important factors in the surprise election result, with the success of Corbyn's conflict-based narratives pointing towards an important rhetorical shift in how collective identity is articulated in British politics.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction 3

2. The General Election in Context: A Divided Nation? 5

3. Narrative, Collective Identity, and Political Communication 7

4. Methodology: Socio-Narratology and Data Collection 12

5. Corbyn versus May: The Key Elements of the Narrative Contest 13

Corbyn, Social Justice, and Inequality – "For the Many, Not the Few" 14

May and a One-Nation Brexit – "The National Interest" 15

6. Narrating Boundaries: Who are We? Who are They? 16

7. Characters, Identification, and Collective Identity 23

Heroes and Martyrs: Collective Representations 23

Villains, Pawns, and False Idols: Defining an Adversary 29

Victims: Narrating Collective Victimhood 34

8. Narrative and Collective Identity: Key Factors in the Election Outcome? 38

9. Conclusion 45

List of References 48

Appendix 1 – Ethics Form 56

Narrative, Collective Identity, and the British General Election of 2017: Corbyn, May, and the Question of Who We Are.

Introduction

Prior to the general election of 2017, the two most recent national votes in Britain – the general election of 2015 and the 2016 Brexit referendum – were notable for the way in which they defied the expectations and predictions of most polling companies and political commentators (Bethlehem, 2017; Fisher and Lewis-Beck, 2016). But when, in April 2017, Theresa May stepped out in front of 10 Downing Street to announce her plans for Britain's first 'snap' general election since 1974, things promised to be different. Every major polling company except one was predicting a strong Conservative majority of anything between 48 and 124 seats (Heath and Goodwin, 2017, p.1). Moreover, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's low popularity ratings, coupled with Theresa May's perceived strength on the upcoming Brexit negotiations, seemed to indicate that the Labour party would experience a significant collapse in their vote share (YouGov, 2017; Helm, 2016). Indeed, many expected that all other political issues would fall by the wayside as Brexit became the decisive factor in what had been labelled the "Brexit election" (Opinium, 2017; Radnedge, 2017). It therefore came as a surprise when election results confirmed what only one polling company had been able to predict: a hung parliament, with neither party able to secure a majority. In their initial reflections on the campaign, Thorsen et al. (2017, p.8) concluded that "even in the context of the election of Trump and the Brexit vote, the General Election of 2017 will go down as one of most extraordinary campaigns of recent times".

The following study aims to assess the role that narrative and collective identity played in this unusual campaign, with a particular focus on how the two main political leaders used narrative to imagine and project different symbolic visions of 'who we are'. Indeed, more so than any in recent memory, the general election of 2017 was particularly

remarkable for its focus on this question, with collective identity in Britain an increasingly divisive, contestable, and disputed notion as a result of the Brexit referendum (Hobolt, 2016). The study explores the different ways in which Corbyn and May narrativised the British public during the election: What were 'we' collectively experiencing? How were 'we' to be defined, and who was to be included in these definitions? What was important to 'us', and what was not? By exploring these themes, it aims to show that an important dimension of the election was the narrative contest that developed over how the voting public's collective identity should be defined.

The study advances our knowledge of the 2017 general election and political communication in three important ways. Firstly, it takes a narrative approach to politics, joining research that explores the varying ways in which narrative is instrumental to our understanding of political realities (Coleman, 2015; Mayer, 2014; Polletta, 1998; Bennett and Edelman, 1985). Secondly, it focuses on how contested ideas of collective identity can circulate during an election, adding to a body of literature that has traditionally focused on the role that collective identity plays in social movements, collective action, and international relations (Greenhill, 2008; Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Wendt, 1994; Melucci, 1989). Thirdly, and more broadly, it examines the election with a particular focus on its aesthetic, cultural, and rhetorical dimensions, drawing on literature that sees political success, leadership, and power as increasingly intertwined with performance, style, and the successful communication of 'symbolic realities' (Alexander, 2013; Corner and Pels, 2003; Mancini and Swanson, 1996). In this way, it provides an alternative, yet still supplementary account of the 2017 general election, which will be able to complement literature that has already approached the topic from a more quantitative, political science oriented perspective (Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Jennings and Stoker, 2017).

The General Election in Context: A Divided Nation?

Why is the general election of 2017 particularly interesting from the perspective of narrative and collective identity? All elections, as Coleman (2015, p.169) has argued, are in some sense narrative contests in which political leaders compete to define the *demos*. In this particular election, however, narrative and collective identity took on a new significance for the way in which definitions over the *demos* seemed more varied and contestable than any before in contemporary British politics. One of the key reasons for this was the British vote to leave the European Union. As Hobolt (2016) argues in an empirical analysis of the referendum, its result portrayed "a deeply divided country, not only along class, education and generational lines, but also in terms of geography." Not only was the country virtually split on the question of leaving the European Union (52% versus 48%), the referendum left many questions still unanswered: Was Britain going to remain a part of the single market? Should Britain retain freedom of movement? Was Britain going to opt for a more pro-European 'soft Brexit', or was it going to sever most ties with Europe and opt for a 'hard Brexit'? Should there be a second Brexit referendum once the terms of Brexit have been established?

The referendum, and the considerable post-referendum debate over these unanswered questions, centred around competing notions of collective identity. On the one hand, the Leave campaign's populist and anti-elitist rhetoric focused on an idea of Britishness centred around sovereignty, arguing that the 'people' needed to 'take back control' from a political and economic union that was seemingly frustrating British control of its own laws, borders, and democracy. The Remain campaign, on the other hand, focused on a more internationalist vision of Britishness, where the benefits of European immigration, trade, and integration were said to far outweigh any perceived loss of sovereignty. These competing ideas of Britishness, coupled with the vitriolic, partisan nature of the public debate, made Brexit an incredibly divisive issue. For some leave voters, those who sought to

advocate for a soft Brexit, or who proposed a second referendum on the terms of Brexit, fell into a camp of "remoaners, liberals, elitists, and, indeed, 'Enemies of the People'" (Clarke and Newman, 2017, p.109). Similarly, the heavy focus placed on sovereignty, nationalism, and Euroscepticism by Brexiteers created the impression among some Remain voters that they were "xenophobes and bigots, Little Englanders", and "foolish opportunists incapable of understanding the dangerous ramifications and likely Domino effects of their choice" (Green et al., 2016, p.11).

With Brexit negotiations only months away, these competing ideas of collective identity were expected to dominate the election, crowding out any other social or economic ideas of collective identity that may have emerged over the course of the campaign. Other debates over social justice and the economy – like whether the British people still wanted to be "all in this together", collectively shouldering cuts to public services in the face of austerity (Atkins, 2015a) – were expected to fade into the background as the public debated what kind of Brexit they wanted. Labour were struggling in most polls, and there were concerns that traditional working-class Labour supporters, mostly in post-industrial Northern towns, were going to abandon Labour in favour of a Conservative party who appeared more competent and clearer on the issue of Brexit. Yet, despite early predictions of a huge Conservative majority, voters woke up on the 9th June to a hung parliament.

While the debate over Brexit remained a key issue during the election, various developments over the course of the campaign meant that other issues came to the fore. Controversial reforms to social care proposed in the Conservative manifesto – framed as the 'Dementia Tax' – caused a great deal of debate about whether Britain was a nation that wanted to place the burden of social care on the elderly and disabled, or whether this was something that the nation should collectively pay for. Moreover, Theresa May's reluctance to face Jeremy Corbyn in a televised election debate, and her eventual backtracking on the 'Dementia Tax', undermined her repeated claims to offer "strong and stable" leadership.

Perhaps most importantly for this study, Labour and Jeremy Corbyn were able to seize the campaign agenda away from Brexit, introducing populist and economic interpretations of collective identity that caused significant debate about austerity, cuts to public services, and inequality. These ideas gained strength not only because of the 'Dementia Tax' saga, but also when terrorist attacks in Manchester and London seemed to foreground recent Conservative cuts to the police and emergency services (Johnson, 2017).

It is for these reasons that the general election of 2017 represents a unique and interesting object of analysis for narrative and collective identity. The election had an unusual political context, which seemed to derive mainly from the fact that there were many different questions of 'who we are' being disputed at once. The impending Brexit negotiations, and the considerable debate over how Brexit should proceed, invoked contestable notions of how Britain should relate to other countries and their citizens. This cleavage was expected to dominate the election, but contrary to expectations, other contestable notions of collective identity arose regarding how Britons should relate to each other on a social and economic level. New narratives emerged about austerity and cuts to public services, and this prompted significant debate over collective experiences of inequality and social justice. It is within this context, then, that this study aims to explore how Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn attempted to narrativise different competing ideas of collective identity through their campaign speeches. Before this, however, it is important to consider the broader relationship that exists between narrative and collective identity in politics.

Narrative, Collective Identity, and Political Communication

Collective identity refers to "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (Polletta and Jasper, 2001, p.285). Collective identity is nothing fixed or essential. Rather, it is a reflexive process.

It is a socially constructed, culturally defined, and an ultimately contestable notion of groups and their self-perception. In the spirit of Fisher's (1984) "narrative paradigm" – a theoretical approach that argues that humans are "story-telling animals" who think, feel, and experience in terms of narrative (Bruner, 1986; MacIntyre, 1981, pp.197-201) – this study adopts the perspective that collective identity is a narrative process (Brown, 2006). Narrative, in this sense, is interchangeable with story, defined in simple terms as "an account of events occurring over time" (Bruner, 1991, p.6). In more complex terms, though, narratives should be understood as 'sense-making' devices, which carry great rhetorical importance due to "their use of sequence to denote causality, their integration of explanation and moral evaluation, and their reliance on a structure (plot) that is familiar from prior stories" (Polletta, 2013).

In politics, this means that the collective identities shared by nations, political parties, and social movements are all constructed, sustained, and contested through the ongoing telling and retelling of narratives that symbolise particular ideas of group identity. This means that collective identity, more so than anything else, is a discursive and performative endeavour. It is discursive, in the sense that it is the product of narratives which themselves are composed of linguistic representations of reality that "systematically form the object of which they speak" (Foucalt, 1972, p.49). And it is performative because, in Frank's words (2010, p.75), it has its origins in narratives that "enact realities", and "bring into being what was not there before" (also see Brown, 2006, p.734).

The relationship between narrative, politics, and collective identity is a relatively underexplored area of political communication research. Most work has emerged from sociology, with a particular focus on the importance of narrative and collective identity in social movements (Norgaard; 2006; Hunt and Benford, 1994). Polletta (2006; 1998), for instance, has examined the way in which successful storytelling can allow disadvantaged groups to establish new collective identities, which can then make activism and group

mobilization more effective. Similarly, Mayer (2014) has drawn upon the power of narrative to transcend common obstacles to collective action, like the tendency for potential activists to avoid participation through 'free-riding', and the difficulty for movements to establish universally agreed upon ideas of their identity, approaches, and ultimate goals. Other studies have drawn upon the importance of narrative and collective identity in the context of nation-building and supra-national organisations (Nuzov, 2017; Eder, 2009; Bhaba, 1990). Despite this, and with the exception of Sheafer et al.'s (2011) quantitative exploration of how narrative and collective identity can be a strong a predictor of voting behaviour in Israel, there is little empirical work that has examined the relationship between narrative and collective identity during election time.

This gap in the literature seems all the more surprising when we consider that narrative and collective identity are a seemingly crucial aspect of election campaigns. Coleman (2015, p.169), for example, has argued that elections are essentially "storytelling contests in which narratives compete for public attention and approval". During election time, narrative takes on a significant role because it is through narrative that competing notions of the *demos'* collective identity are constructed, contested, and reconstituted:

> Elections exist to give tangibility to the abstract notion of 'the public'. They weave narratives around the word 'we', thereby giving substance (potentially, at least) to the central protagonists of the democratic drama: the demos itself. It is precisely because the agentic force of 'we the people' cannot be captured by the reductive psephological quantification of swings, majorities, percentage turnouts, and vote-to-seat ratios that democracies need periods of political performance in which stories are told about who we think we are, what we think we deserve, who we think politicians are, and who we think they think we are. Elections are storytelling contests in which

> the demos comes to be represented by identifying with competing and contested narratives about itself (Coleman, 2015, pp.168-169).

Of the many narratives involved in this process, few are more important than politicians' narratives, the stories that political leaders tell in an attempt to represent the public. Importantly, political leaders do not use narrative to represent the public "in the conventional political sense of speaking up for their interests", but rather in a "broader aesthetic sense", whereby they aim to "rhetorically construct a public by addressing people as if they would know which moral category they belong to" (ibid, p.171). In other words, political leaders use narratives to construct and enact particular ideas of collective identity, in the hope that these visions stick. If they do, they induce identification, and become 'representative' of citizens' own self-perceptions of collective identity (Saward, 2006). Given the importance of narrative and collective identity during election time, then, there is a greater need for more empirical work that explores the differing ways in which they intersect: How do different political leaders attempt to narrativise collective identity during election time? How do these different attempts to narrativise collective identity relate to leaders, their ideological stances, and the political context that they find themselves in? Why might some attempts to narrativise collective identity be more successful than others?

In addition to this, there is a greater need to integrate empirical work on collective identity and narrative within a wider body of political communication research that focuses on its cultural, aesthetic, and symbolic dimensions (Corner and Pels, 2003; Corner, 2000; Mancini and Swanson 1996; Edelman, 1965). For example, within this wider body of research, scholars have focused on how successful political leadership has become increasingly dependent on: the public projection of a private persona (Parry and Richardson, 2011; Langer, 2010; Smith, 2008; Corner, 2000); the careful management of a public image (Finlayson, 2002); dramaturgical performance (Rai, 2015; Alexander, 2013; Drake and Higgins, 2012); the effective use of symbolic language, imagery, and frames (Cammaerts,

2012; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Edelman, 1965); and the adoption of elements of celebrity and popular culture (Wheeler, 2012; Davis, 2010; Street, 2004). Little is known about how narrative and collective identity fit into this picture. To what extent is the successful narrativisation of collective identity an important part of contemporary political leadership? In addition to those elements listed above, is the effective narrativisation of collective identity another essential part of how political leaders successfully communicate what Mancini and Swanson (1996, p.9) term “symbolic realities”?

The following study thus aims to ground these theoretical and empirical questions within an investigation of how Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn narrativised collective identity during the general election of 2017. It therefore aims to advance our understanding of narrative, collective identity, and political communication in two particular ways. Firstly, where much work focuses on narrative and collective identity in the context of social movements and international relations, this study aims to offer an empirical account of how narrative and collective identity function during an election, with a particular focus on the narratives that political leaders communicate. Secondly, it aims to add to a growing body of culturally oriented political communication research, by showing how the effective use of narrative in order to enact particular notions of collective identity is another important symbolic aspect of political leadership in contemporary politics. In this way, the following study aims to answer three particular research questions:

- What different ideas of collective identity did Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn seek to communicate during the general election campaign of 2017?
- What different narratives did they use to enact these competing understandings of collective identity?
- Did one narrative account of collective identity become more compelling than the other? And if so, can this help to explain the election result?

Methodology: Socio-Narratology and Data Collection

In order to explore how Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn narrativised different ideas of collective identity during the general election, this study draws upon the theoretical principles of socio-narratology, and the analytical method of dialogic narrative analysis (DNA). These approaches to narrative focus on “stories as actors, studying what the story does, rather than understanding the story as a portal into the mind of a storyteller” (Frank, 2010, p.13). Key to this approach is its analytical focus on the performative and discursive capacity of narrative, and narrative’s ability to enact certain social realities. In *Practicing Dialogical Narrative Analysis,* Frank (2012, p.33) argues that dialogical narrative inquiry investigates how stories “are artful representations of lives”, how they “reshape the past and imaginatively project the future”, how they “revise people’s sense of self”, and crucially for this study, how “they situate people in groups”.

Where collective identity and politics is concerned, this theoretical and methodological approach is attractive because it is especially concerned with how “stories connect people into collectivities” and how they “coordinate actions among people who share the expectation that life will unfold according to certain plots” (Frank, 2010, p.15). Although this study is not explicitly concerned with providing methodological insights, it will hopefully demonstrate the potential value of socio-narratology in political communication research. Indeed, socio-narratology and DNA are dedicated to understanding how different narratives can create different social worlds, and as Bennett and Edelman (1985, p.160) have argued, “there are always conflicting stories – sometimes two, sometimes more – competing for acceptance in politics”.

The data collected for the study was drawn from campaign speeches, which were collated from a mixture of online videos, online news media, and official press releases. Data was transcribed where necessary, and a corpus of speeches was built. This was a relatively

large data set, comprised of all the campaign speeches made by Corbyn and May. This meant that the study was able to offer a broad and holistic account of the main narratives and themes that they communicated during the election campaign. As discussed, the analytical method used is a qualitative approach, and thus one limitation of the study is that it cannot provide a large-scale, quantitative account of the various stories told during the election. Instead, in line with more cultural approaches to political communication, its aim is to provide a detailed and in-depth account of the relationship between narrative and collective identity in Corbyn and May's speeches.

Corbyn versus May: The Key Elements of the Narrative Contest

How, then, did Corbyn and May seek to narrativise a particular understanding of collective identity? In what ways, and on what terms, did their narratives draw boundaries around the *demos*, including and excluding different ideas of group identity? Who were to be the key characters – the heroes, villains, and victims – in their unfolding political narratives? Before turning to these questions, it is important to give an overview of the key themes and ideas that dominated May and Corbyn's campaign narratives, and to thereby establish the main ways in which Corbyn and May attempted to 'emplot' the social and political world. The process of emplotment is a key aspect of narrative's constructive power. By selecting and organizing separate political phenomena, and by imbuing these phenomena with temporal and causal relationships, emplotment connects the incomprehensible, myriad happenings of day-to-day political life into narrative form, thereby giving them a sense of coherence and meaning. As Somers (1994, p.616) argues, "it is emplotment that gives significance to independent instances", and "that translates events into episode". Crucially, the different plots that Corbyn and May sought to utilise in their stories became the basis on which their differing notions of collective identity could be introduced and communicated.

Corbyn, Social Justice, and Inequality: “For the Many, Not the Few”

Jeremy Corbyn’s use of narrative centred around the party’s slogan – “For the Many, Not the Few” – which used plot in a way that connected themes of government cuts, inequality, and social justice to a populist notion that there was a democratic majority, “the many”, who were being unfairly represented at the hands of “the few”. One particularly good example of this was Corbyn’s (2017a) first speech during the election. Throughout the speech, Corbyn talked of a political system, economic agenda, and government that was allowing a small minority of wealthy individuals to undermine the interests and desires of the nation. He spoke of a “rigged economy” and a “cosy cartel”, who were said to be “hoarding this country’s wealth for themselves”; he mentioned a Conservative government which was said to be “drunk on a failed ideology” and “hell bent on cutting every public service they get their hands on”; and finally, he talked about the Conservatives’ “wealthy friends in the city who crashed our economy” with their “recklessness and greed”.

Corbyn connected this narrative of an unfair economic system to the plight of the ordinary citizen. He argues that “it was not pensioners, nurses, the low or averaged paid workers or carers who crashed the economy”, yet they are the ones who are being “punished” for it with cuts to public services and a low-wage economy. This victimhood narrative then allowed Corbyn to argue for a more egalitarian distribution of economic growth. There are people “monopolising the wealth”, he argues, but it “should be shared by each and every one of us in this country” and it “should belong to the majority and not a tiny minority.” Corbyn is able to emplot a variety of different political issues within the context of this overarching narrative: cuts to public services, a low-wage economy, inequality, greed, and the Conservative government were all linked by a story about the “many” versus the “few”. Indeed, much of Corbyn’s narratives centred around this key theme, and as we will see, it became the foundation for the populist ideas of collective identity that he sought to convey.

May and a One-Nation Brexit – "Strong and Stable Leadership in the National Interest"

If Corbyn's use of narrative was populist, then Theresa May's use of narrative was nationalist. Her slogan – "Strong and Stable Leadership in the National Interest" – summarised the campaign's focus on May's political qualities as a leader, alongside the importance of securing the national interest in the upcoming Brexit negotiations. In narrative terms, May's (2017a) story emphasised a united nation that was faced with an incredibly important task: a "moment of enormous national significance". This story began from the premise that "Britain is leaving the European Union and there can be no turning back". Faced with this monumental task, May argued that Britain would require "strong and stable leadership […] to take us through Brexit and beyond". The ultimate resolution of this enormous task, for May, is to "make a success of it for the future of our country". Success, however, is defined in terms of a 'hard' Brexit. This would mean fewer ties with the EU ("not to be half-in or half-out of the EU"), and greater national sovereignty ("taking back control of our borders, our money and our laws").

An important part of May's narrative was the idea that only the Conservatives could operate in the national interest so defined. Just like Corbyn's narrative, which attacked the "few" for being complicit in growing inequality and public sector cuts, May's narrative pitted the Conservatives against the parties and institutions that she believed would frustrate this national interest. Labour "have threatened to vote against the final agreement"; the Liberal democrats "have said they want to grind the business of government to a standstill; "unelected members of the House of Lords have vowed to fight us every step of the way"; and "threats against Britain have been issued by European politicians and officials". Central to May's plot was the idea that the people of Britain were 'one-nation' united behind this national interest, desiring the kind of Brexit deal that the Conservatives were proposing and showing "a real unity of purpose for us to get on with the job of Brexit". Thus, of all the myriad political issues that May could have narrativised, emplotment works here to make the

national interest, defined in terms of a successful ‘hard’ Brexit, a salient concern in her narrative constructions of collective identity.

Boundaries and Collective Identity – Who are We? Who are They?

Central to the construction of a collective identity is the delineation of certain boundaries, and the drawing of a line between who ‘we’ are and who ‘they’ are. In Giesen and Seyfert’s (2016, p.113) words, collective identity is defined as a “culturally rooted similarity among the fellows of a community, in distinction to outsiders”. This naturally entails “questions about what these boundaries are based on, and the conditions under which they can be crossed”. The differing ways in which Corbyn and May constructed boundaries around the electorate – through the establishment of certain in-groups and out-groups – would thus be a key aspect of how they attempted to enact certain ideas of collective identity. Both leaders used boundaries in significantly different ways. Where Jeremy Corbyn constructed group boundaries which included and excluded members on the basis of populist and economic criteria, Theresa May’s constructed group boundaries based around certain ideas of national identity.

Jeremy Corbyn constructed a populist idea of collective identity through his narratives about “the many” versus “the few”. Take for instance, a story that he told during the Labour manifesto announcement on the 16th May:

> People want a country run for the many not the few. That is because for the last seven years our people have lived through the opposite; a Britain run for the rich, the elite and the vested interest. They have benefitted from tax cuts and bumper salaries while millions have struggled. Whatever your age or situation, people are under pressure, struggling to make ends meet. Our manifesto is for you (Corbyn, 2017h).

Corbyn's story constructs an in-group – "the many" – who are defined as "our people", a large group in Britain who are considered to be under financial pressure. These are contrasted to the outgroup, the "few", a group comprised of "rich, the elite, and the vested interest". The boundaries established between the two collective identities are primarily economic, with difference constructed according to a narrative of just deserts. Over the last 7 years, the "few" have enjoyed "tax cuts and bumper salaries", while the "many" have been "under pressure" and "struggling to make ends meet". The narrative separates the *demos* into two clearly delineated groups: the 'real' people of Britain – "our people" – are the ones who have suffered economic hardship as a result of the decisions of an elite, who themselves are excluded on the basis of their excessive wealth and prosperity.

In this way, Corbyn's narrative establishes a populist view of collective identity. This is a view which, in Mudde's (2004, p.543) words, "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'", within which "politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people". This antagonistic relationship, which revolves around competing homogenous understandings of different collective identities, is what underlies most populist movements, and it can be used to accompany thicker ideologies like nationalism. In this particular case, Corbyn uses it to push the case for a kind of politics more traditionally associated with left-wing ideology: an increased role of the state in public life, further investment in public services, and a more egalitarian distribution of wealth. His use of narrative and collective identity is similar to other parties and movements which have recently attempted to adopt populist conceptions of collective identity in order to advance a left-wing agenda. For example, Corbyn's ideas of collective identity can be likened to European parties like Podemos and Syriza, Bernie Sanders in America, and social movements like the *Indignados* and the Occupy movement (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). Indeed, in the same way that Corbyn pitted the "many" against the "few", the Occupy

movement pitted the “99%” against the “1%”, and Bernie Sanders pitted the “establishment” against the “people”.

Although “the many” were imagined to be a homogenous group – in the sense that they were all united in their economic opposition to the “few” – Corbyn used narrative in a way that encouraged heterogeneity within this group. Take, for instance, a narrative he adopted several times throughout the election about people who were “being held back” in Britain. Corbyn (2017f) told a story about a variety of citizens: “If you’re a student nurse without a bursary, doing a second job to make ends meet”; “if you managed a ward in a hospital and can’t free up beds”; “if you worry about your children because they can’t get together the deposit for a home or afford the rent”; “if you’ve worked hard all your life, but can’t pursue your dreams in retirement”; and “If you’re a young couple, or anyone trying to get a home and can’t make a home because rent and house prices are too high”. People of different ages, occupations, and situations are each faced with their own distinct concerns and problems, yet they are encouraged to be united in their difference, by the collective experience of “being held back”.

Corbyn’s attempts to narrativise a populist conception of collective identity thus involved the creation of what Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p.130) have termed “chains of equivalence”. Chains of equivalence are integral to any political notion of collective identity seeking to attain broad political support. They describe the connections made between distinct groups and individuals who, despite having their own unique identities, concerns, and beliefs, become united in the struggle against a shared adversary. The groups and individuals connected by a chain of equivalence are heterogeneous, in the sense that their unique relationship to this common adversary is punctuated by different interests, experiences, and consequences, yet they are homogenous in the sense that their political struggle is ‘equivalent’, with each member of the chain retaining a shared interest in overcoming a particularly defined set of power structures.

In this way, Corbyn's narratives connected the individual struggles of nurses, teachers, and parents to a wider collective struggle of "the many" versus "the few", creating a chain of equivalence between them. The boundaries he constructed around the collective identity of the "many" were thus open towards different identities, occupations, and groups. This, however, was on the condition that they could be subsumed within narratives that united these different subject positions under the umbrella of the collective economic struggle against the "few". Thus, the boundaries Corbyn narrativised were exclusive, in the sense that the 'us' and 'them' were defined in purely populist and economic terms, but they simultaneously encouraged difference and heterogeneity within these categories.

Theresa May, on the other hand, constructed boundaries through the establishment of a homogenous understanding of national collective identity. The 'we' and 'they' were to be defined by their relationship to the British nation, with inclusion and exclusion based on one's attitude towards the nation and its future. May's narratives often centred around the upcoming Brexit negotiations. In the Conservative manifesto launch speech, she told the story of a country that was facing a "defining moment", about to "embark" on a "momentous journey for our nation". This defining moment concerns all of the British people:

> Our future prosperity, our place in the world, our standard of living, and the opportunities we want for our children – and our children's children – each and every one depends on having the strongest possible hand as we enter those negotiations in order to get the best Brexit deal for families across this country. If we fail, the consequences for Britain and for the economic security of ordinary working people will be dire. If we succeed, the opportunities ahead of us are great (May, 2017h).

Citizens are treated as a single, homogenous, national grouping, with an equal stake in the Brexit negotiations and their potential consequences. This is exemplified by the seemingly

inconspicuous use of inclusive pronouns to signify a shared identity: "*our* future prosperity", "*our* children's children", and "the opportunities ahead of *us"*. These represent examples of what Billig (1995) has termed "banal nationalism", the use of mundane, everyday signifiers that in fact serve as powerful reminders of people's national communion. The boundaries drawn around this national grouping, however, are defined in terms of Brexit. The national body can be imagined in many different ways (Anderson, 1991), and in this case, the national body is one whose livelihoods, future, and lives are increasingly dependent on the successful 'hard' Brexit deal outlined by the Conservatives. Those who are unable to accept this construction stand outside of these national boundaries.

Particularly interesting was the way in which Theresa May narrativised 'them', the people who were to be seen as excluded from the nation's collective identity. May (2017h) had been clear throughout the election that she would pursue a Brexit deal that involved as few ties with the EU as possible: "That is why I have been clear that we do not seek to fudge this issue – to be half-in and half-out of the EU". She said on numerous occasions that "no deal was better than a bad deal", and that she wanted to take "back control of our borders, our money and our laws" (May, 2017f; 2017i). Her use of narrative sought to exclude from the collective anyone who would seek to eschew this more sovereign understanding of EU relations. May (2017b) talked about the European Commission and politicians in Brussels who have "issued threats against Britain", "who do not want these talks to succeed" and "who do not want Britain to prosper". Those who favoured a softer Brexit and greater parliamentary scrutiny over the deal, like the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party, were accused of undermining the British people. May (2017f) argued that "they will do anything they can to disrupt the Brexit negotiations" and "to frustrate and undermine the task ahead and to stop us from leading Britain into a stronger future".

In this way, the *demos* were defined as one-nation; regardless of their class, occupation, or background, they were united by their desire for greater sovereignty and a

Brexit deal that involved fewer ties with the EU. Boundaries were drawn around this group, and anyone who had an alternative vision, be that a ‘softer’ Brexit deal, a future referendum on the terms of the Brexit deal, or closer ties with the EU, were seen as antithetical to the interests and desires of the British collective. This was perhaps an overly rigid and prescriptive understanding of the British people, when we consider that the country was relatively split on the nature of Brexit, and how it should proceed (see page 42 for further discussion).

At the beginning of the election, Theresa May rarely narrativised anything other than this Brexit focused understanding of collective identity. However, as the election proceeded, she began to tell stories that diverged from this focus. Take, for instance, a story she told during a speech one week prior to the election. She started by saying that the “mission of the government I lead is not just to get the best deal for Britain in Europe”, but “to shift the balance in Britain in favour of ordinary working people here at home too”. She then goes on to tell a story about “those who are just about managing to get by”:

> People who are working around the clock, giving their best, but for whom life is still too often a struggle […] Because for too long – for too many people – life has not seemed fair: if you can’t afford to get onto the property ladder, or your child is stuck in a bad school; if you’re one of the ordinary working people who made huge sacrifices after the financial crash, but see no evidence that the people who are better off than you did the same; […] Above all, if you‘ve been trying to say things need to change for years and your complaints fall on deaf ears; if your patriotism is deemed somehow distasteful, your concerns about immigration dismissed as parochial, your desire for your country to make the decisions that matter to Britain here in Britain ridiculed and ignored for too long. Life simply doesn’t seem fair. (May, 2017i).

Theresa May tells a story of an economically disadvantaged group who experience an everyday struggle in their lives. Some of the themes that Theresa May discusses are similar to the themes discussed in Jeremy Corbyn's stories about "the many". There are people who "can't afford to get onto the property ladder", who have a "child stuck in a bad school", and who have "made huge sacrifices after the financial crash". This is still tied to a nationalist based understanding of collective identity, because this group are presumed to be patriotic, with a "desire" for the country "to make the decisions that matter to Britain here in Britain".

Nonetheless, by using narratives that attempt to encompass the economically disadvantaged within the boundaries of patriotic notions of British collective identity, Theresa May's rhetoric draws heavily "one-nation Conservatism", a particular conservative idea of nation and collective identity that emerged in the 19th century. In response to a growing working class, and in order to recoup votes lost to the Liberals, Conservative leader Benjamin Disraeli sought to expand the appeal of his party by re-imagining the nation as a politically inclusive and socially united body, with a dedication to social reform geared towards increasing opportunity for economic prosperity, regardless of class (Vail, 2015, p.110). This approach remained an important part of Conservative politics up until the beginning of Thatcherism in 1979, and after electoral failure in the 1990s and early 2000s.

In this particular context, there are two reasons why May might have done this. Firstly, a vision of collective identity that included economically disadvantaged citizens could have helped further May's appeals to sections of the electorate who had previously voted Labour or UKIP, and who were attracted to the Conservatives due to their perceived strength on Brexit. Secondly, by this point there had been a small but not insignificant swing in the polls to Jeremy Corbyn, and there were increasing questions about May's commitment to the economically disadvantaged after the publicly criticised 'Dementia Tax'. As such, May's narratives of one-nation Conservatism were perhaps an attempt to mitigate this. Thus, where her early one-nation narratives focused on national identity and Brexit, her later one-

nation narratives were extended to include more traditional ideas of one-nation grounded in equality of opportunity, social justice, and paternalistic commitments to the "just about managings".

Characters, Identification, and Collective Identity: Our Heroes and Villains

Characters are one of the most important aspects of narrative. The heroes, victims, and villains that punctuate our stories are central to the construction of collective identity because, in Polletta's (2015, p.39) words, "we imagine who we are, who we want to be, and who we are not through our response to narrative characters". Indeed, psychological approaches to narrative have shown this, finding that the primary mode of emotional engagement with narrative is identification (De Graaf et al., 2012). It is through identification that we can come to see ourselves in certain characters. And, through identification, we can come to sympathise with certain characters and to see them as victims. But it is also through a lack of identification that we can come to see certain characters as different to us, and in dangerous cases, as villainous or worthy of apathy. This has important consequences for politics and collective identity. The characters offered out by politicians and their narratives call for collective identification. We are encouraged to see heroes as "our heroes", worthy of collective acclaim and devotion; victims as "our victims", in need of our support and restitution; and villains as "them", the people who are obstructing and frustrating the collective will. As such, the characters that Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn enacted through narrative would form an important part of the collective identities that they sought to project.

Heroes and Martyrs: Collective Representations

In her study of characters in political storytelling, Polletta (2015) argues that political characterisation tends to fall into three distinct categories: heroes and martyrs; villains,

pawns, or false idols; and victims. The first of these to consider are heroes and martyrs. These are either celebrated figures, or individuals who have endured suffering and personal sacrifice as a result of their admirable political beliefs and deeds. Jeremy Corbyn's heroes and martyrs invoked a collective identity based around economic solidarity and collectivism. In an early campaign speech, Corbyn (2017b) told a story about the combined work of the Labour party and the trade union movement:

> They are our heroes. It was our predecessors who suffered exploitation in the workplace and wider society, and it was they who were not prepared to stand idly by, who instead chose to fight back and win many of the gains that we enjoy today. Our NHS, our social security safety net, our education system and so much more were won on the shoulders of these giants in the Labour and trade union movement and none of us should ever forget that.

Labour and the trade union movement are the heroes and martyrs that embody these ideals of economic solidarity. They "suffered exploitation in the workplace", yet they were able to "fight back" and "win many of the gains that we enjoy today". Citizens are invited to see themselves as standing "on the shoulders of these giants in the Labour and trade union". The trade union movement, and the willingness to fight more broadly for the NHS, social security, and education, are something that 'we' as a collective should celebrate and esteem. The *demos* is supposed to be a 'we' that understands the importance of public services and workers' rights, and which shares an admiration for the role that Labour and the trade union movement have played in upholding these particular ideals of social and economic justice.

Corbyn also regularly told stories that cast public sector workers as heroes and martyrs. Teachers, nurses, doctors, paramedics, and firefighters were all portrayed as

figures to be celebrated by society. In a story about the struggles in the NHS, Corbyn (2017g) argued that the people who work in the institution are “the best in our country and in our society”. In a story about head teachers and the day to day difficulties of working in a school, Corbyn (2017d) talked of how he is “always in awe of the local head teachers I work with”, who are “at the heart” of their communities. After the two terrorist attacks which occurred during the election campaign in Manchester and London, Corbyn (2017k; 2017l) talked about the “heroism” of “nurses, firefighters, police, doctors and paramedics”. Through these stories, Corbyn was able to further the idea that the people who work in public services should be celebrated by the political collective. This tied into his political support for an end to both austerity and the public sector pay cap, which had seen real terms cuts to public services and public sector pay. Narratives about the heroism of these ‘ordinary’ public servants thus furthered his populist argument about “the many”, whose heroes were not being correctly recognised by “the few”. These narratives of heroism, and the ideas of collective identity that they communicated, thus became the basis for more ideological arguments about the size of the state, austerity, and public sector pay.

Political leaders, whether they like it or not, must also become the heroes or martyrs of their own narratives. Increasingly, contemporary political leadership involves projecting symbolic visions of self and persona that can connect and embody the *demos* (Drake and Higgins, 2012; Corner, 2000). In Alexander’s (2013, p.136) words, “politicians must become collective representations, textured and tactile images that inspire devotion, stimulate communication, and trigger interaction”. It is for this reason that the symbolic appeal of a leader can be an integral part of collective identity formation and group cohesion (Steffens and Haslam, 2013; Huddy, 2013). Jeremy Corbyn (2017c) attempted to narrativise his own heroism during a speech on the 29th April. The speech was particularly notable for the way in which it illustrated Corbyn’s tendency to pitch himself as an “authentic political outsider” (Bennister et al., 2017). His narrative began as follows:

> And now for a sentence I've yet to utter in my political life: Enough about you, what about me. I've just laid down the gauntlet and asked you to step up. Each and every one of us must step up for Britain, including me. In the 34-years since I became a MP, I have been attacked for what I believe in. But it has not changed my core values, and sadly many of the problems we faced then are still with us. In 1983, I stood up in Parliament for the first time and used my maiden speech to condemn deeply damaging cuts in public services and the NHS.

Expressing his discomfort with talking about himself, and by talking about being attacked for "34 years" for standing up for what he believes in, Corbyn sets himself up as both a martyr and an outsider: someone who is not concerned with the modern conventions of leadership persona and celebrity politics (see Street, 2004; Corner, 2000), and someone who is not afraid of fighting for his principles against political attack. This appeal to authenticity is further demonstrated by the fact that he has "not changed" his core values, and that he has fought for the NHS ever since his maiden speech in parliament. He later goes on to talk about how he has continuously worked for "profound and lasting change", and how he has even been arrested for his opposition to apartheid in South Africa. He then argues that:

> I've seen Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition come and go. But for all their achievements and failures, what I didn't see was a sustained attempt to rid this country of what really holds people back. I never heard a clear invitation for everyone in the country to work together and create a real alternative to our rigged economy […] For many years, I couldn't see much beyond how so many political leaders manipulated us while giving in again and again to vested interests. I didn't want to be like that. And it wasn't clear to me there could be another way. But I've learned there is.

Corbyn is able to present himself as different. Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition "come and go", but none of them are able to "rid this country of what really holds people back". It is through this narrative that Corbyn's authenticity and 'outsiderness' become relevant distinctions for his political leadership of the *demos.* Corbyn, unlike any other politician, can become the collective embodiment of the "many" precisely because of his unique and principled approach to politics, and his ability to envisage and fight against "what really holds people back". The story about his political past, in his own words, serves to illustrate that he has a "mind-set that serves the many not the few".

Corbyn's tales of being an authentic political outsider thus feed into his populist understanding of collective identity. His stories chart the course of a political career that can be said to embody the populist struggles between the "many versus the few" and "the people versus the establishment". Despite being the leader of a well-established parliamentary party, Corbyn's outsider narrative allows him to become a collective representation in a way that one would traditionally associate with social movements or protests, with its focus on directing radical energy towards criticisms of established democratic institutions, practices, and processes. Indeed, this can be seen as a continuation of Corbyn's rhetoric prior to the election which, in Bennister et al.'s (2017, pp.102-103) words, sought to communicate an idea of leadership "rooted in the mythology of collectivism and the movement".

In contrast to Jeremy Corbyn, the narratives that Theresa May sought to employ did not utilise a wide variety of clearly defined heroes and martyrs. Whereas Corbyn at times sought to cast the citizenry as the heroes and martyrs of the *demos'* collective narrative, May only cast the Conservative party and herself as heroes. This heroism was understated, and was defined largely by a narrative which sought to highlight the way in which the Conservative party and May had competently and successfully established a clear and unifying vision for Brexit, thus highlighting their "strong and stable" leadership:

> When I took over as Prime Minister, people said the country was divided, that it could never be brought together. But actually what I see today in this country is a unity of purpose: a desire for the Government to get on with the job of putting Brexit in to place and making a success of it. And when I took over as Prime Minister, the country needed clear vision and strong leadership to ensure that we got on with that job of delivering on Brexit for the British people and that's exactly what we did. We delivered that strong and stable leadership. We delivered the certainty that strong and stable leadership can give (May, 2017a).

This narrative was repeated over the course of many speeches (May, 2017b; 2017c; 2017d; 2017e), and it attempted to highlight Theresa May and the Conservative party's unique successes on the issue of Brexit. They take credit for bringing together a "divided" country, and establishing a "unity of purpose" among the British people. They also take credit for getting "on with that job of delivering on Brexit for the British people", though this was questionable, given that negotiations had not yet even begun.

Nevertheless, by casting herself and her own party as heroes of the narrative – defined in terms of competency and success on Brexit – May again articulated a nationally oriented idea of collective identity. The collective hero is a leader or party that can unify the country as 'one-nation' and deliver Brexit "for the British people". Heroism is defined in terms of how best one can achieve the desires of the nation, a group who are homogenous in their wish for the sovereignty and national pride that comes with a 'hard' Brexit. The leadership requirements of the collective, defined in this way, are conservative: they need "certainty" and "strong and stable leadership", a drastically different idea when compared to the radical critical energy that Jeremy Corbyn's outsider narratives sought to establish. Other than this narrative, Theresa May used very few heroes and martyrs in her narratives. Instead, her characterisation focused largely on villains, which we now turn to.

Villains, Pawns, and False Idols: Defining an Adversary

Polletta's (2015, p.40) second type of political characters are villains, pawns, and false idols, which arise when "political actors cast opponents as narrative antagonists", as "malevolent or corrupt" and as "buffoons or pawns of the truly powerful". This kind of negative characterisation is an important part of collective identity formation in politics, because, as Polletta (*ibid,* p.40) argues, it "is a way to turn what may be a vague and abstract set of forces into someone who can be opposed". Villains, pawns, and false idols are the "them", the adversaries outside the collective that should be opposed by "us". For Corbyn, the villains and false idols that he narrativised formed an important part of his populist idea of collective identity. They became the "few", the elite, economically defined group of vested interests that were an obstacle to the interests of the "many". In his first campaign speech, Corbyn (2017a) set out to define the villains of his "many versus the few" narrative. He talks about "failed political and corporate elites", "wealth extractors", "cosy cartels", "establishment experts", "privatisers profiting from our public services" and "the multinational corporations and the gilded elite who hide their money in the Cayman Islands".

The Conservative party are characterised as the pawns of this economic elite, because they are "too morally bankrupt to take them on". Bankers are described as the Conservatives' "wealthy friends in the City who crashed our economy". Corbyn also remarked that "if I were Mike Ashley or the CEO of a tax avoiding multinational corporation, I'd want to see a Tory victory". The Conservatives are accused of being complicit in the success of this financial elite, and as being incapable of representing the people in the battle against the "few". Corbyn (2017e) reiterates this in another narrative:

> When Labour wins there will be a reckoning for those who thought they could get away with asset stripping our industry, crashing our economy through their greed and ripping off workers and consumers. When did the

> Conservatives - Osborne, Cameron, May, Johnson - ever stand up to their financial backers and demand our money back? Never and they never will.

The financial elite and the Conservatives have been complicit in asset stripping, crashing the economy, and ripping off the public, because the economic elite are the Conservatives' "financial backers". It is for this reason that Corbyn names prominent Conservatives, like former Prime Minister David Cameron, and argues that they will "never" stand up to them. The Conservative party are not only represented as pawns, but they are also depicted as villains as well:

> She talks about building a fair society. Does she think people will forget what the Tories have done to this country, how they've actually treated working people? This Tory leader sat alongside David Cameron in government for six years. She was in the cabinet room when they introduced the bedroom tax. So were the Liberal Democrats as part of Cameron's coalition. What was fair about that? And what was fair about racking up tuition fees? Or about taking benefits away from people with disabilities? Or about closing Sure Start Centres? Or starving schools of cash? Or opening up the NHS to be plundered by profiteers? And what was fair about giving big business and the richest in society tax giveaways worth tens of billions of pounds - while the rest of us were told to tighten our belts, to accept a big dose of austerity? The Tories are hoping everyone has short memories.

Here, Corbyn defines villainy in terms of how the Conservative party handles welfare, economic, and social policy. Austerity, tax breaks, the closure of sure start centres, cuts to disability benefits, and an increase in tuition fees are all presented as symptomatic of "what the Tories have done to this country". The Conservatives have traditionally presented these cuts and policies in the form of a crisis narrative, in which both the government and the

public are cast as martyrs who must endure the necessary and unfortunate consequence of post-financial crisis austerity (Atkins, 2015a). Indeed, as Stanley (2014) has argued, these crisis narratives made fiscal consolidation, for some of the citizenry, an important part of their collective lexicon, creating the idea of a public and government who were paying the price for “reaping what we sowed” and “living beyond our means”.

Corbyn’s characterisation of the Conservatives’ austerity policies as villainous represented a break with these ideas of collective just deserts and sacrifice, instead proposing a very different idea of the public’s experience of Conservative austerity policies. Indeed, Corbyn’s narrative was one of betrayal and unfairness. While “big business and the richest in society” received “tax giveaways worth tens of billions of pounds […] the rest of us were told to tighten our belts, to accept a big dose of austerity”. In this way, the austerity narrative becomes another layer of the struggle between “the many” and “the few”. In Corbyn’s austerity narrative, the “many” are a group whose collective experience of austerity was ultimately one of betrayal at the hands of the “few”. The Conservatives are recast as the villains and pawns, no longer the martyrs, in this story. They become a distinctive “them”, a group on the wrong side of the struggle between “the many” and “the few”.

The villains and pawns in Theresa May’s narratives were presented in terms of their approach to Brexit. In a story that she reiterated in many of her speeches, May (2017a; 2017b; 2017c; 2017d; 2017e) talked of how other parties are handling Brexit:

> And that is very clear. Let’s look, the other parties are lining up to prop up Jeremy Corbyn. We’ve seen it with the Liberal Democrats, and we see it with Nicola Sturgeon’s Scottish nationalists. They’re very clear that they want to do everything they can to frustrate our Brexit negotiations, to undermine the job that we have to do, the task that lies ahead, to do everything to stop us from being able to take Britain forward […] They want to pull the strings, try to

pull the strings of this election, prop up Jeremy Corbyn and provide more risk and uncertainty for the British people and that's not in Britain's interests.

The villains and pawns of Theresa May's narratives were those who sought to undermine and critique her and her party's plans for Brexit. Other political parties are accused of deliberately trying to undermine Brexit negotiations in a sinister plot. There are "other parties are lining to prop up Jeremy Corbyn", like the "Liberal Democrats" and "Nicola Sturgeon's Scottish nationalists", who are "very clear that they want to do everything they can to frustrate our Brexit negotiations". According to May's story, these parties are a villainous group, pawns of Jeremy Corbyn, who are deliberately undermining the "job that we have to do" and the "task that lies ahead". This is a nation-based understanding of villainy, because their actions are said to be directed towards doing "everything to stop us from being able to take Britain forward." As such, by being encouraged to see heroes and villains in terms of how they relate to Brexit negotiations and "taking Britain forward", citizens are encouraged to see collective identity from a national perspective, in contrast to Corbyn's idea of an economic collective.

However, to say that May endorses a national view of collective identity does not tell us much about the particular content of that identity. In other words, it does not tell us how the national collective is to be defined or 'imagined' (Anderson, 1991). A nation can be conceived in many different ways, be it pro-internationalist, sovereign, religious, under threat, and so on. It is crucial, then, to note that May's choice of villains and pawns endorses a particular idea of national collective identity that highlights the importance of a 'hard' Brexit, which carries with it a particular focus on sovereignty and exceptionalism. If the nation's villains are the political parties that want a 'soft' Brexit and closer post-Brexit ties with the EU, or a second referendum on the terms of the Brexit deal, then it follows that the national collective is imagined to be one that desires neither of those things. Instead, the national collective is imagined to be inclined towards a Brexit deal that is decisively not pro-

European, in contrast to that desired by the Liberal Democrats and the SNP. The national collective is therefore imagined to be explicitly concerned with sovereignty, opposing a kind of internationalism that would hinder the authority of the nation state. They are said to share the Conservatives' and May's view of Brexit which, in another speech, was described as aiming to "take back control of our borders, our money and our laws".

Unsurprisingly, another key villain in May's use of narrative was Jeremy Corbyn. In the same way that Corbyn's narratives about May and the Conservative party fed into his narrativisation of a collective economic "many" struggling against the "few", May's narratives about Corbyn fed into her larger narrativisation of a collective concerned with nation and security:

> The strange thing about general election campaigns is that you don't often get to see your opponent close up. But last night, I did. I saw Jeremy Corbyn close up on television and what I saw was revealing. Despite being a Member of Parliament for 34 years, despite being the Leader of the Labour Party for the last two years, he's simply not ready to govern – and not prepared to lead. He's not prepared to use the nuclear deterrent. He's not prepared to take action against terrorists. He's not prepared to give the police the powers they need to keep us safe. He's not prepared to take a single difficult decision for the good of our economy. He's not prepared to answer questions about his long track record of supporting people who want to harm – and even attack – our country. And – with the Brexit negotiations due to begin only eleven days after polling day – he is not prepared for those negotiations (May, 2017i).

On what basis is Corbyn vilified? Corbyn is vilified largely because he is said to be ill-prepared to defend the nation, or to take difficult decisions in the national interest. He is "not

prepared to use the nuclear deterrent"; he is not prepared to "take action against terrorists"; and he's not "prepared to give the police the powers they need to keep us safe". He also has, according to May, a "long track record" of supporting people who want to harm or attack "our country". This all feeds into her idea that he is "not prepared" for Brexit negotiations. Again, villainy is defined in purely national terms, this time with a focus on security. Because the collective villain is defined in terms of his inability to protect the nation, or by his lack of strength when it comes to defending the nation, the *demos* is presumed to be a national collective that desires a form of strong leadership capable of ensuring national security, even if it entails the use of a nuclear deterrent.

It is likely here that May was attempting to capitalise on a particular conception of Corbyn as unpatriotic and weak on security, a criticism that had often been levelled at Corbyn through the media, largely drawing on his support for non-nuclear proliferation, the Stop the War campaign group, and alleged links with the IRA (Cammaerts et al., 2016). Nevertheless, to do so was to propose a radically different idea of collective identity than that proposed by Corbyn's use of villainy. Corbyn's villains informed the construction of a collective identity that was both economic and populist. The villains were a financial elite, in alliance with a Conservative government, who were presiding over inequality and frustrating the economic needs of the many. In contrast, May's idea of villainy constructed a nationalist view of collective identity that invoked a *demos* concerned with national security, sovereignty, and a 'hard' Brexit deal. Villains were the parties that sought closer European Union ties at the expense of sovereignty, alongside Jeremy Corbyn, who was unprepared to take the drastic measures necessary to secure the nation's safety and security.

Victims: Narrating Collective Victimhood

We now turn to Polletta's (2015, p.41) final category in her analytical framework for political characters: victims. Victims arise when, in Polletta's words (*ibid*, p.41), "political

actors try to gain attention and support for their cause by telling compelling stories about ordinary people who have suffered". The narrativisation of victims is an important part of collective identity formation. Victims are a central part of establishing an us-them dichotomy; they become evidence of the struggle between the in-group and the out-group, the "we" who have suffered at the hands of "them". Indeed, Jeremy Corbyn's narratives of victimhood served to demonstrate his populist idea of an economically underprivileged "many" struggling against an elite, wealthy "few":

> That is because for the last seven years our people have lived through the opposite: a Britain run for the rich, the elite and the vested interest. They have benefitted from tax cuts and bumper salaries while millions have struggled. Whatever your age or situation, people are under pressure, struggling to make ends meet […] Parents worrying about the prospects for their children and anxious about the growing needs of their own elderly parents. Young people struggling to find a secure job and despairing of ever getting a home of their own. Children growing up in poverty. Students leaving college burdened with debt. Workers who have gone years without a real pay rise coping with stretched family budgets (Corbyn, 2017h).

"Our people" are treated as a homogenous group who have all collectively experienced victimhood as a result of "a Britain run for the rich, the elite, and the vested interest". While they are homogenous in the sense that they are all suffering, Corbyn is again able to create chains of equivalence between different experiences of suffering. There are "parents", who are worried "about the prospects for their children", and who are "anxious about the growing needs of their own elderly parents". There are "young people", who are struggling to find work and homes. There are "children", who are "growing up in poverty". Students are "leaving college burdened with debt". And finally, there are workers with "stretched family budgets" who have gone "years without a real pay rise".

Corbyn thus communicates a collective experience of victimhood, which arises through the establishment of chains of equivalence between different experiences of economic and social suffering. Corbyn's articulation of victims can be seen as an example of what Mouffe and Laclau (1985) argued, namely that populist collective identity formation revolves around a 'lack'. That is, Corbyn's populist and economic idea collective identity is necessarily based on an idea of collective lack – in this case a lack of social and economic justice – which is understood to be an impediment to the realisation of the collective's 'true' political identity. There is no better evidence for this than the already discussed "held back" narrative on page 18. This very idea of lack hinges upon narratives about suffering, and the successful casting of the *demos* as victims in their unfolding political narrative. In this way, Corbyn's construction of a collective identity, 'the many', are defined not by what they *are*, but rather by what they *are not yet able to be.*

Theresa May used narratives of victimhood less frequently than Jeremy Corbyn. This could largely be because the Conservative party had been in government for seven years at the time of the election, and too many narratives about victims would almost be an admission that their government had failed to establish a competent government record. When May did use victimhood narratives, they were often used to describe the future, and how the citizenry will become victims if Brexit negotiations are not handled well. In one speech, May (2017f) talked about the potential consequences of a bad Brexit deal:

> Because making Brexit a success is central to our national interest. And it is central to your own security and prosperity. Because while there is enormous opportunity for Britain as we leave the European Union, if we do not get this right, the consequences will be serious. And they will be felt by ordinary, working people across the country.

If Brexit is not successful, there will be serious consequences that "will be felt by ordinary, working people across the country". While these consequences are not made clear, May implies that an unsuccessful Brexit will affect "security" and "prosperity". This suggests that the *demos* should be concerned with "making Brexit a success". By arguing that the *demos* will become victims if Brexit is unsuccessful, it is implied that the national collective should see their fortunes as inextricably linked with that of the nation and Brexit. May (2017i) continued this theme in another speech, where she talked about the consequences for public services if Brexit was to go badly:

> If we don't make a success of Brexit, we won't have the financial means to fund the public services on which we all rely. Our National Health Service – the institution which is there for us at the most difficult times – needs us to make a success of Brexit to ensure we can afford to provide it with the resources it needs for the future. Every school in every village, town and city needs us to make a success of Brexit. If we want to continue to provide a sustainable welfare system, with help targeted at those who need it most – we need to make a success of Brexit. If we want to go on investing in transport infrastructure – our roads and bridges and railways – we need to make a success of Brexit. If we want to continue to play our part on the world stage, standing up for our liberal values, with strong defences to protect us – we need to make a success of Brexit.

Again, victimhood is an implied future outcome, rather than a present reality. The citizenry will become victims if Brexit is not handled well, because there will not be enough money to fund the "public services on which we all rely". NHS, schools, and transport will be underfunded, and Britain will not be able to "play our part on the world stage". Thus, this narrative represents another attempt by May to construct a collective that identifies heavily with the national interest. Victims do not arise through economic inequality or an elite "few"

who control the country's wealth, as in Corbyn's victim narratives. Rather, they emerge when the country fails to secure its national interest: "making Brexit a success".

The only time May told similar stories about economic victims was when she invoked one nation Conservatism through narratives about the "just about managing", as already discussed on page 23. Like Corbyn, this was May's (2017i) attempt to create chains of equivalence between a variety of different economic victims, such as people who "cannot afford to get on the property ladder" and those "who have taken pay cuts" and "lost their jobs". There are implications that these victims have arisen through wealth inequality, but there are also implications that "low-skilled immigration" has been responsible. Then, there are victims who have been "ridiculed" and "ignored" for being concerned about immigration, for being patriotic, and for desiring that the country makes "decisions that matter to Britain here in Britain". They are all connected by a sense that "life simply doesn't seem fair". By creating chains of equivalence between economic victims and victims of immigration, patriotism, and nationalism, citizens are encouraged to view economic and social justice as closely connected to ideas of national unity and sovereignty. This victim narrative further contributed to an idea of collective identity grounded in one-nation conservatism, where citizens were encouraged to see their economic identity and national identity as symbiotic.

Narrative and Collective Identity: Key Factors in the Election Outcome?

Thus far, it has been argued that narrative and collective identity were an important feature of Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn's rhetoric during the 2017 general election campaign. With a particular focus on three key aspects involved in the narrativisation of collective identity – emplotment, boundaries, and characterisation – it has been argued that Corbyn and May articulated two particularly distinct ideas of collective identity. Contrary to expectations, these competing ideas of collective identity were not a mere repeat of the competing ideas of collective identity that pervaded the Brexit referendum, such as the

antagonism between sovereignty and internationalism, or nationalism and Europeanism. Theresa May narrativised a nationally oriented view of collective identity, placing a particular emphasis on a collective national interest which was defined primarily in terms of sovereignty, security, and the importance of a ‘hard’ Brexit deal. In contrast, however, Jeremy Corbyn communicated a very different view of collective identity which revolved around the populist articulation of an economic group, the “many”, whose collective interests in well-funded public services and a more socially and economically just society were being frustrated by the “few”, an elite group of wealth controllers and Conservative politicians. The final part of the study functions as a discussion of these findings, with the aim of answering two particular questions: Was one account of the *demos’* collective identity more persuasive, compelling, and believable? And if so, can narrative and collective identity go some way towards explaining the surprise results of the general election?

In order to answer these questions, Corbyn and May’s narratives will be discussed within the context of Fisher’s (1984, p.4) “narrative paradigm”. This approach to narrative holds that stories make their arguments not through a rationalist logic, but through the logic of “good reasons”. This means that the art of telling a persuasive story is less a matter of evidence, rational calculation, and truth, and more a matter of believability, and how an account of events may accord with “history, biography, culture, and character” (Fisher, 1984, pp.7-8). To be persuasive, the narrative paradigm holds that stories must attain “felicity” and “narrative rationality” through the establishment of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1984, p.16). Narrative coherence concerns whether a story is structured and consistent, while narrative fidelity deals with the perceived truth of a story, and whether it correlates with lived experiences, interpretations, values, and beliefs.

One potential explanation of Corbyn’s surprise success in the general election was that his narratives about collective identity achieved a greater deal of felicity and narrative rationality when compared to Theresa May’s. Of course, this point can only be conclusively

proven by a great deal of audience reception data, which is well beyond the remit of this study. Moreover, this study has only considered the speeches that May and Corbyn made, and thus one of its limitations is that it cannot account for how narrative rationality was reconfigured or disrupted by mediated representations of their narratives. However, in tandem with the already existing data and insight resulting from the general election – namely contributions from Heath and Goodwin (2017) and Bale and Webb (2017) – we can begin to hypothesise about how May and Corbyn's different approaches to narrative and collective identity may have impacted their electoral fortunes. In this way, the potential value of a narrative analysis of the general election, as an accompaniment to more political science oriented analyses, can be demonstrated.

Perhaps some of the most defining narratives of the election were those through which Theresa May attempted to communicate a one-nation view of the *demos*. These narratives often centred around Brexit, and the idea that there was a "real unity of purpose" for the country "to get on with the job of Brexit" (May, 2017a). As a way of rhetorically constructing a particular collective identity for the *demos*, discourses of one-nation and national unity are nothing new in British politics. As already discussed, ideas of one-nation Conservatism emerged as early as the 19th century, and rhetorical ideas of one-nation have become increasingly widespread in contemporary British politics. Atkins (2015a), for example, has shown how rhetorical ideas of one-nation gained particular political success for the coalition government in 2010, who used the idea of being "together in the national interest" to justify deficit reduction and austerity to the general public. In another study, Atkins (2015b) also showed how Ed Milliband, the former leader of the Labour party, regularly used narratives of one-nation to argue for social security reform.

There is reason to believe that May's use of one-nation narratives in relation to Brexit were particularly infelicitous, owing largely to the fact that public opinion was still largely divided over the issue. The idea that there could be a national collective that could be united

around May's (2017i) particular idea of nation and Brexit – a 'hard' Brexit that would aim "take back control of our borders, our money and our laws" – was unlikely. Not only had nearly half of voters rejected this kind of Brexit during the 2016 referendum, but studies and polls have indicated that there still remained significant divisions over whether Britain should retain single-market access, whether there should be a second referendum, and whether sovereignty, controlled immigration, and national identity should be prioritised ahead of free trade, freedom of movement, and greater European integration (Barnard and Ludlow, 2017; YouGov, 2017b; Survation, 2017). May's one-nation narratives of Brexit, which sought to enact a monolithic idea of a British people concerned with sovereignty, security, and the national interest, were impossible attempts at creating narrative closure over the still contested notions of collective identity that had pervaded the Brexit debate.

These particular rhetorical constructions of collective identity could have adversely affected May's electoral fortunes. In their post-election analysis, Bale and Webb (2017, p.23) have argued that one of the key factors that caused the Conservatives to lose their majority was a "remain backlash". They argue that there was a "flipside" to "the Conservatives' efforts to attract working-class 'authoritarian' and anti-immigration/anti-European voters", which was a "backlash they seem to have suffered in constituencies which voted for Remain" among "well-heeled, well-educated, AB (or, if they were students, future AB) voters and/or voters from ethnic minorities". Indeed, this was a point picked up by Heath and Goodwin (2017, p.11) in their aggregate level quantitative analysis of vote swings. They showed that the Conservative vote share was more likely to increase in areas that backed Brexit, but this was offset by the fact that they were significantly more likely to lose votes in pro-Remain areas with significant numbers of graduates. Like Bale and Webb (2017), Heath and Goodwin (2017, p.11) suggest that Conservative voters were "alienated by Theresa May's vision of a 'hard Brexit'", arguing that her "strategy of aggressively courting the 2015 UKIP vote might, therefore, have backfired". If this is the case, then May's one-nation Brexit narratives formed an important part of this strategic misfire.

Also interesting was how May's narratives about "strong and stable leadership in the national interest" struggled to attain narrative coherence. These narratives sought to establish a particular idea of how the *demos* ought to be led, focusing on the national collective's need for strength and stability as Brexit negotiations approached. However, developments during the campaign only served to undermine the idea that this was what May could provide. May, for example, refused to appear in televised leaders' debates alongside Corbyn, which gave off the impression that she was scared to confront him. Moreover, May's refusal to guarantee a 'Triple Lock' on pensions, coupled with a U-turn on the proposed changes to social care included in the Conservative manifesto, raised doubts about whether May could provide leadership that was strong, stable, or in the national interest at all. Indeed, these so-called tactical failures became quite damaging at one point, with counter-narratives developing that sought to cast May as a 'weak and wobbly' leader (Bale and Webb, 2017, p.21).

While this would suggest that one reason why the Conservatives lost their majority was because Theresa May's stories failed the test of narrative rationality, another reason could be that Jeremy Corbyn's stories were able to pass this very same test. As already discussed, Corbyn linked government cuts, inequality, and social justice to a populist narrative about a democratic and economic majority, "the many", who were being unfairly represented at the hands of "the few". These narratives were distinctively anti-austerity, and they circulated left-wing populist ideas of collective identity that had already attained success for parties like Podemos and Syriza in Spain and Greece, Bernie Sanders in America, and social movements like the *Indignados* and Occupy (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). It is likely that these narratives about collective identity became particularly felicitous and believable among Labour voters during the election campaign.

Indeed, Bale and Webb (2017, p.22) argue that one reason for Labour's surprise success was that the election became, for many, "the austerity election", centring around

“widespread concerns” that “key public services (and the people who work in them) were coming under serious financial strain as a result of the austerity policies pursued by the Conservatives”. In a post-election survey of 14,000 respondents, one polling company found that 57% of Labour voters attributed their vote to either concerns about the NHS, spending cuts, poverty, jobs, or the economy (Ashcroft, 2017). Corbyn’s populist articulation of an economic collective identity – which established the idea of a *demos* that was suffering, struggling, and “being held back” as a result of austerity, inequality, and fiscal consolidation – would thus appear to have helped make these issues salient during the campaign, with post-election polls suggesting that they could have achieved a great deal of felicity, or “narrative rationality”, among Labour voters.

Of course, that is not to say that May’s narratives about collective identity were infelicitous in the eyes of the whole electorate, or likewise, that Corbyn’s narratives were accepted by the totality of the *demos.* Narrative persuasion has a different effect on different audiences, and this is conditioned by a wide range of phenomena such as values, opinions, identities, and partisanship. There is reason to believe that many voters still accepted May’s narrative constructions of ‘strong and stable leadership in the national interest’ or a ‘one-nation’ Brexit. Indeed, 61% of Conservative voters cited either Brexit or “the right leadership” as their reasons, and the Conservative party did particularly well in constituencies that had backed Brexit, and among voters who had previously backed the UK Independence Party (Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Ashcroft, 2017). Similarly, the fact that Labour still ultimately fell way short of a majority suggests that many voters rejected Jeremy Corbyn’s populist constructions of an economic “many”.

What is interesting, however, is that they key phenomena underlying the election’s surprise vote swings can be related to the different narrative constructions of collective identity that the two leaders sought to enact. The available literature has not only acknowledged that voters may have turned away from May’s attempts to establish a national

consensus on a ‘hard’ Brexit, but also that many Labour voters saw inequality and lack of under resourced public services as an increasingly salient concern in the election (Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Bale and Webb, 2017). Narrative and collective identity thus seem like they were important factors in the 2017 general election results. Indeed, if this is the case, the successful narrativisation of collective identities could represent another important symbolic aspect of leadership in British politics. This would add to those already discussed by political communication research, such as persona and public image (Parry and Richardson, 2011; Langer, 2010; Finlayson, 2002; Corner, 2000); dramaturgical performance (Alexander, 2013; Drake and Higgins, 2012); and celebrity and popular culture (Wheeler, 2012; Street, 2004).

Perhaps most interestingly, the apparent success of Corbyn’s populist narratives potentially mark an important rhetorical turn in the way in which collective identity is articulated in contemporary British politics. For the past two decades, narratives of one-nation have pervaded leaders and their speeches, with relative success: Blair regularly used appeals to “one-nation” politics in his time as Prime Minister (Finlayson, 1998); David Cameron and Nick Clegg’s coalition government claimed that Britons were “together in the national interest” ahead of austerity (Atkins, 2015a); Milliband narrated his own view of a one-nation Labour in his attempts to lead his party (Atkins, 2015b); and as shown in this analysis, May communicated her own vision of a united, one-nation Brexit. Yet, the divisive nature of the Brexit referendum, coupled with increasing public concern over inequality, austerity, and public services, has meant that questions of ‘who we are’ are becoming particularly contestable in Britain. In this context, coming to some sort of national consensus on ‘who we are’ is an increasingly futile endeavour.

Narratives of a one-nation Brexit, for example, are unlikely to be felicitous when the British population is considerably divided on how, if at all, Brexit should take place. Likewise, the narratives of a one-nation approach to austerity and fiscal consolidation, popularised by

the coalition government's "we're all in this together" rhetoric, are increasingly losing their sway as more and more citizens become concerned about inequality and underfunded public services. As such, Corbyn's populist narratives may be indicative of a more conflict-based approach to collective identity formation in British politics, where narrative attempts to define the *demos* become increasingly agonistic or antagonistic, characterised by sharper distinctions between 'us' and 'them', and more brazen attempts to clearly delineate political adversaries. This development can be situated within the context of the increasingly conflictual nature of political debate in Britain both during and after Brexit. But also, it can be situated within the context of a wider turn towards conflict-based interpretations of collective identity in advanced liberal democracies, precipitated largely by the recent success of both left-wing and right-wing populist parties (Alvares and Dahlgren, 2016).

Conclusion

The intention of this study has been to investigate the relationship between narrative and collective identity during the general election campaign of 2017, focusing on the speeches delivered by the two main party leaders, Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn. The value of such an approach has been justified not only by the fact that narrative and collective identity are relatively underexplored, yet increasingly significant dimensions of political communication during election time (Coleman, 2015), but also by the fact that the election emerged in a unique context for British politics where collective identity had become a significant concern. It is important to note that the study does have some limitations. For example, it has only focused on the two main leaders' speeches, and it has thus been unable to consider the different narratives used by the leaders of Britain's smaller parties. Moreover, by limiting its focus to leaders' speeches, the study has not been able to explore how different narrative constructions of collective identity were spread through mediated channels of communication, like news and social media. Indeed, these would represent

interesting areas of study for any future research into the roles that narrative and collective identity play in election campaigns.

Nevertheless, the study's detailed approach to the two leaders' speeches has allowed it to establish and interrogate the key overarching narratives that Corbyn and May used in their attempts to enact particular ideas of collective identity. By adopting the theoretical and methodological principles of socio-narratology, with its focus on the discursive and performative capacity of narrative, it has been argued that two key narrative constructions of collective identity dominated their speeches. The first of these was Theresa May's 'one-nation' idea of collective identity, which constructed a nationalist *demos* united by a common concern for sovereignty, security, and a 'hard' Brexit deal. The second was Jeremy Corbyn's populist view of collective identity, which constructed the *demos* as an economic group, "the many", who were enduring austerity, inequality, and under resourced public services because of the "few", an elite group of Conservative politicians and wealthy economic interests.

In the final part of the study, these findings were situated within a wider discussion of the election outcome, using the already available literature on the election campaign. This has hopefully demonstrated the potential value of combining more quantitative, political science oriented accounts of the election with accounts that focus on the rhetorical and cultural dimensions of political communication. Indeed, by applying Fisher's (1984) concept of narrative rationality to the study's findings, in combination with Heath and Goodwin (2017) and Bale and Webb's (2017) accounts of the election outcome, it has been hypothesised that narrative and collective identity were important factors in the surprise election result. It is important to caveat this by noting that conclusively establishing causal links between narrative and the election result is certainly beyond the remit of this study. Still, such a relationship seems plausible given that the important factors underlying the election's key

vote swings appeared to be directly related to the different narrative constructions of collective identity that the two leaders tried to convey.

Perhaps the most important observation arising out of this discussion is the suggestion that Jeremy Corbyn's populist use of narrative represents an important rhetorical shift in how collective identity is articulated in British politics. Since Tony Blair's premiership in 1997, one-nation narratives have pervaded the way leaders try to rhetorically formulate collective identities for the *demos* (Atkins, 2015a; 2015b; Finlayson, 1998). During this time, clear distinctions between 'us' and 'them' have been eschewed in favour of a catch-all approach to collective identity formation, where rhetoric invoking national homogeneity and unity have been front and centre. However, coupled with the divisive nature of the recent Brexit debate, the conclusions originating from this study suggest that conflict-based approaches to collective identity formation seem to be gaining more traction in British politics. Here, narrative attempts to define public are becoming dominated by clearer distinction between 'us' and 'them'. It is not yet clear whether this will be a positive or negative development in British politics. What does seem clear from the findings of this study, however, is that the relationship between narrative and collective identity is becoming an increasingly important object of analysis for scholars of British political communication.

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