Brexit, the NHS and the double-edged sword of populism:
Contributor to agonistic democracy or vehicle of ressentiment?

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Abstract
In this paper we argue that mature political democracies require an agonistic form of populism in order to function. Agonistic populism counters technocratic apathy and instrumental reductionism and provides democracies with discursive legitimacy for the expression of antagonisms. We draw on the exemplary case of Brexit to show how the long-term suppression of English populism by an all-conquering British imperial discourse, and the hegemony of technocratic solutions in Europe, transformed populism’s potentially virtuous agonistic effects into an often anachronistic, toxic and ill-directed ressentiment against the European Union. We call upon management scholars to focus on how popular ressentiment can be used as a force for good in two ways: (1) by contributing agonistically to an alternative, emotionally founded discourse about England, the European Union and a new popular civilizational project that could bind them; and (2) by inducing the creation of collective moral categories embraced across the elite/non-elite divide in the image of the post-World War II National Health Service.

Keywords
Agonism, antagonism, Brexit, Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, NHS, populism, ressentiment

Introduction
When the then European Union (EU) Council President Herman Van Rompuy was asked in 2010 about the biggest risk facing Europe, he replied: ‘The great danger is populism’
(Stabenow, 2010). Fast forward 9 years and it could be argued that the populist moment arrived with the Brexiteers’ victory, Donald Trump’s ascendance to the US presidency and Italy’s new populist government. Also, in France, Marine Le Pen’s National Front gave Emmanuel Macron a run for his money in the second round of the French presidential election and, whereas the latest elections in the Netherlands and Germany did not result in outright victories for the populist parties (Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom and Alternative for Deutschland respectively), these factions left a deep impression on the electoral landscape. Last, the ongoing potent populism in countries such as Hungary and Poland continues to threaten liberal democratic values.

Whereas elite media, politicians and intellectuals typically defame populism as mere demagoguery based on a venomous mix of anti-intellectualism, nationalism and xenophobia (De Cleen et al., 2018), in this article we use the exemplary case of Brexit to argue that this criticism is ill conceived analytically. The rise of populism, whether on the political right or left, warrants more sober, but arguably also controversial, analysis that examines both the causes of populism and its constitutive role in enabling mature political democracies to function. We draw on the theoretical lexicon of Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 1999, 2013) and notions of agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 2005, 2013), and antagonism in particular, as the emotionally laden building blocks of effective challenger politics in an institutionalized democratic system (Hensmans, 2010; Martin, 2013).

For Laclau and Mouffe, populism is a particular logic related to articulating the popular will – an anti-establishment logic built on passions and affects which carries the promise of emancipation of the ‘people’ from overly rational and institutionalized political practice in times of socioeconomic upheaval (Laclau, 2005). By providing discursive legitimacy to the expression of antagonisms and countering attempts to reduce democratic politics to a mere individual and technocratic exercise devoid of ‘irrational’ or unreasonable passions and emotions, Laclau and Mouffe show how populism can be a conflicting, but essential, element of a healthy democratic process. This is not to deny that populism can undermine rather than co-constitute a revitalized democratic consensus. We argue in this article that if the democratic consensus – whether liberal or social-democratic – does not provide sufficient space for populist articulation of emotional foundations, it can become the vehicle of historically unreconstructed and contextually ill-directed ressentiment (Scheler, 1961).

It is this ressentiment rather than populism that becomes a self-defeating turn, which is nurtured by a historical feeling of suppression of a rightful voice against the political fait accompli. When it eventually is released into the public sphere, ressentiment tends to enable ventilation of long-repressed antagonisms in non-productive and ill-directed ways. We argue that the Brexit vote is an example of the historical building of ressentiment, based on the long-term suppression of English populism by an all-conquering British imperial discourse – reinvented by Thatcher in a neoliberal guise (Hensmans, 2010: 332) – which transformed populism’s potentially virtuous agonistic effects into an often anachronistic and misdirected ressentiment towards the EU. EU leaders contributed to this ressentiment, preferring to constrain the European public sphere to an instrumental liberal consensus rather than engaging with emerging populist antagonisms and building the emotional foundations for a democratic EU that was less technocratic and more agonistic in nature (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009: 5; Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970). We call upon management scholars to focus on how popular ressentiment can be used as a force for good in two ways: (1) by contributing agonistically to an alternative, emotionally founded discourse about England, the EU and a new popular civilizational project that will bind them; and (2) by inducing the creation of collective moral categories embraced across the elite/non-elite divide in the image of the post-World War II National Health Service (NHS).
Populism, antagonism and agonistic politics

Left-wing and centrist politicians and media frequently consider populism to be a dirty word that is used to decry the exploitation of right-wing and narrow-minded resentments towards perceived corruption of the politically correct establishment, on themes such as globalization, immigration, religion and gender equality. However, populism is not a monopoly of the political right since in Latin America and Europe left-wing populism is also prevalent. Chavismo, Podemos and La France Insoumise all consider society as split into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps: the ‘people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 6). We follow Laclau (2005) in arguing that the essence of populism is to be found in ontological rather than ideological or content-specific terms since ‘populism has no referential unity because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic whose effects cut across many phenomena’ (p. xi).

The overarching essence of populism rests on its logic of constituting a popular identity of ‘the people’ against an elite, achieved by unifying various societal demands and identities in equivalent chains and constructing antagonistic frontiers (Laclau, 2005: 77, 154). The greater the division between the people and the establishment, and the greater the number of causes articulated in an anti-establishment project, the more it is populist (Howarth, 2015: 15). Conceptualizing populism as a normal, if not essential, political project around social identity formation and the working of any communitarian space opens up analytical space that questions the ‘clear-cut moulds of a rational community … and the assertion that the management of community is the concern of an administrative power whose source of legitimacy is a proper knowledge of what a “good” community is’ (Laclau, 2005: x).

Also, our conceptualization of populism sheds different light on its typical underlying causes. Populism, at least the current variant in the West, is normally explained by socio-economic, cultural and technological changes, such as sluggish economic growth, unemployment, economic and social-cultural globalization, demographic variations, Internet and computing innovations and loss of white male dominance in favour of greater diversity in the workplace (De Cleen et al., 2018; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Moreover, critical and well-informed citizens argue that the political and civil service establishments cling on to a supranational and elitist liberal consensus rather than making decisions that reflect the true will and interests of the people (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Zakaria, 2016).

As explained by De Cleen et al. (2018: 651 emphasis in original), these factors are undoubtedly of importance for explaining populism; however, ‘populist politics cannot be reduced to a symptomatic effect of extra-political developments’ because populism itself is a deeply political process of struggle. While disruptive socio-economic, cultural and technological changes induce the emergence of ‘left-behind’ sentiments, the hegemony of technocratic politics often pre-empt their meaningful activation in emancipating movements, resulting in further anti-political contempt or apathy. By addressing left-behind concerns in a more authentic – because it is unabashedly antagonistic and emotional – way, populist movements at least temporarily function as an antidote to technocratic discourse (Panizza, 2005), mobilizing the silenced and disenfranchised for practical, collective action.

We follow Laclau and Mouffe and, also, Polanyi (1957: 132), in arguing that political democracies essentially are a delicate balancing act between popular demands for liberty and equality, championed respectively by cosmopolitan elites and local grassroots defenders of social protectionism. At present, liberal ‘right wing’ aspects, such as free market thinking, consumerism and individualism, overpower the more ‘left wing’ egalitarian, protectionist aspects (De Cock and Böhm, 2007). At the same time, institutions that are perceived to be run for elites by elites (e.g. WTO, IMF, central banks and the EU) further threaten the legitimacy of liberal democracies. As a
consequence, citizens increasingly feel that their votes may be appreciated every few years, but
that their voice is valued less. Moreover, citizens typically are deprived of actual political choice
or real alternative to the currently hegemonic neoliberalism of the EU and most other Western
liberal democratic societies (Hensmans, 2003b; Mouffe, 2005, 2013). Among parties on both the
political left and the political right, there appears to be consensus that there is no real alternative to
neoliberal globalization (e.g. New Labour’s Third Way) and this has led to the erosion of demo-
cratic conflict. This alleged consensus ‘leads to apathy and to a disaffection with political partici-
pation’ (Mouffe, 2013: 7) and provides the breeding ground for ressentiment and the rise of populist
movements.

To counter these neoliberal hegemonic power relations, Mouffe proposes a theory of ‘agonistic
pluralism’, that is, a form of democracy rooted in constructive conflict rather than consensus.
According to Mouffe (2000), ‘consensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be –
the expression of hegemony and the crystallization of power relations’ (p. 49). Mouffe argues that
the tensions between the liberal and democratic logics of liberal democracies need to be re-estab-
lished by the constitution of a ‘we’ that is set against a ‘them’ or, in more populistic terms, con-
struction of a voice of the people against the voice of a hegemonic elite. Establishing a broad front
offers a real opposition against hegemonized power relations and promotes debate in society about
alternative directions. Here, populism’s constructive role is that it can put onto the agenda those
issues that the wider public considers valuable, but which the hegemonic bloc of political, cultural
and economic elites chooses not to question seriously or discuss critically (e.g. immigration, glo-
balization) because they are considered irrational and/or unreasonable.

For instance, since the fall of the Berlin wall, US and European elites have equated a particular
liberal and procedural type of democracy with civilization, that is, what constitutes an advanced
stage of human social development and organization (Hobson, 2008). Democracy increasingly
became linked to elites’ global priorities and caught up in a geopolitically hegemonic discourse,
rather than coming from below – the people’s grievances. Beyond elites’ geopolitical agendas,
however, ‘a democratic politics needs to have a real purchase on people’s desires and fantasies’
(Mouffe, 2000: 148). By providing a passionate reality check to elites’ hegemonic discourse, a
populist movement can force the elites to provide substance to the civilizing effects of democracy,
translating people’s deep-felt grievances into a popular civilizational project that binds elites and
non-elites into joint development and organizational change. For instance, inspired by Greta
Thunberg’s climate protest in Stockholm, the 17-year-old Belgian student Anuna De Wever in
2019 instigated a massive disobedience movement among fellow non-voting students to break the
deadlock of technocratic politics and geopolitical realpolitik regarding climate action. The ‘rise for
climate’ movement was soon joined by a host of middle class families, civil society associations
and critical–juncture-sensing elites; allying to question the civilizing effects of current practice and
push tangible and systemic courses of action on a political agenda that all too often ignores long-
term effects for the next generation of children and grandchildren.

Before exploring this agonistic model further and examining it in a Brexit context, for clarity,
we provide a brief discussion of the essential notion of antagonism. For Laclau and Mouffe (2001),
any attempt to fix meanings and hegemonize a social or political order is accompanied by a ‘radical
negativity’ that not only makes total closure impossible but also implicates ongoing struggle and
antagonism. Antagonism in its original, political sense (Schmitt, 1932: 37) is a means for groups to
classify the world into the categories of ‘friend and enemy’. Antagonism is a highly emotional,
simplifying mechanism that instils a strong belief in the superior worth of one’s own community
as opposed to other communities and draws on contradictions and the construction of a common
adversary (cf. Gamson, 1995).1 Fundamentally, agonistic populism draws on antagonisms as it
seeks to unite different voices (i.e. build ‘chains of equivalence’) to form a political frontier of an
‘us’ of ‘the people’ set against a ‘them’ of a dominant hegemonic power bloc (see Hensmans, 2003a; Hensmans and Van Bommel, 2018; Parker and Parker, 2017; Van Bommel and Spicer, 2011). Mouffe’s (2000, 2005, 2013) model of agonistic politics acknowledges that antagonism can foster a friend/enemy distinction in a polarizing and potentially resentful manner. Mouffe (2013) argues that, when debated in the democratic space at an early stage, antagonism becomes agonism: a constructive ongoing struggle of political identities between adversaries ‘whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned’ (p. 7).

However, rather than viewing antagonism as a central feature of the political domain, today’s liberal democracies tend to silence or negate antagonism and the importance of passions in the constitution of collective identities, in favour of a continuation of ‘cold’ deliberation and consensus. As argued above, the consequence is the emergence of lack of conflict and real choice. This provides the breeding ground for the current, more toxic form of populism, centred on xenophobia, nationalism and nativism. Therefore, we follow Mouffe’s (2013) suggestion that ‘the search for a consensus without exclusion and the hope for a perfectly reconciled and harmonious society have to be abandoned’ (p. xi). We argue for a more agonistic view of populism. We suggest that, somewhat paradoxically, an agonistic approach that aims actively to exploit antagonisms and related passions by drawing on constitutive populist strategies offers a means of escape from a more toxic form of populism. Following Mouffe (2013),

The prime tasks of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions or relegate them to the private sphere in order to establish a rational consensus in a public sphere. Rather, it is to ‘sublimate’ those passions by mobilizing them towards democratic designs, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives (p. 9)

that is drawing on these passions as part of a civilizing project.

Overall, an agonistic perspective suggests that populism can function as a vehicle for the timely expression, modernization and constructive integration of constitutive antagonisms in the public domain. In this more progressive guise, populism protects democracies from technocratic apathy and instrumental reductionism, acting as a vital medium of constructive conflict and an inclusive political democracy. If the constructive potential of populism is suppressed for an extended period and is channelled into resentful antagonisms, then, on the contrary, it becomes an expression of withdrawal and dysfunction. We illustrate our argument below by showing how Brexit and the suppressed English populism at the heart of anti-European ressentiment exemplify this latter process.

The historical building of Brexit ressentiment

Ressentiment is the rush of the disenfranchised to assume moralizing contempt for the strong (Sloterdijk, 2000: 56). It builds up under a number of conditions (Demertzis, 2006; Scheler, 1961: 48–52) including (1) chronic internalized powerlessness to influence the order of things; (2) a structural gulf between formal and substantive equality – between formal citizenship rights and real power; and (3) clear comparison – contemporary or historical. By proposing new boundaries between good and evil, ressentiment can be a creative force at the root of popular moral values (Nietzsche, 1967: 11).

Similar to populism, the essence of ressentiment is found in ontological rather than morally or ideologically specific terms: it provides the potential for polemical politics and antagonism that help to revitalize a stagnant status quo. Ressentiment has virtuous effects if it prompts power-holders, such as political, civic or business leaders, to take account of the disenfranchised as a
moral category and assume responsibility for them (cf. Deleuze, 2006: 116). For instance, ressentiment among women about their disenfranchised status gradually induced political and business leaders to take action to achieve greater gender equality of opportunity.

However, if unengaged with by power-holders, ressentiment can lead to a reversal of its disenfranchised proponents’ values. Existential anxiety can become toxic when what people most admire – liberty, equality and parliamentary democracy in the case of English populists – becomes their object of antagonism because it is being realized on the terms of the ‘immoral’ power-holders – the EU institutions and their freedom of mobility, social chapter and parliament. Hence, if ressentiment is left unengaged with, it can give rise to a toxic, value-reversing and nostalgic type rather than an agonistic type of populism.

We argue that the historical and contemporary suppression of an agonistic space in the relation between a vigorous English and European democracy, over the last five decades has nurtured a toxic form of populism, following the conditions described above. The question of a popular English will or an English national identity became a matter of public debate very late – in the 1990s - compared to similar debate in continental Europe (Kumar, 2003, 2006). When it did emerge, commentators remarked on how little substance there was. Historically, expressions of English popular will have been subordinated to British imperial concerns; first, domestically, to unify bonds with Ireland and Scotland and to set Britain apart from its continental European cousins; later, in relation to the strife with continental European competitors over overseas colonies.

The idea was that the creation of a convincing Britishness also involved interpreting Englishness as an identity that had lost much of its relevance in the current geopolitical reality. English popular will was best expressed through a British imperial and civilizing mission – even when this meant subtracting all English civilizing elements that might antagonize Scottish and Irish popular will (Kumar, 2006) and imposing an anti-European historical interpretation to demonstrate British exceptionalism (Jones, 1997). Since the 16th century, an emotional chain of equivalence between three expressions of British difference reinforced the folk myth that, essentially, the English were citizens of a non-European country. These expressions were (1) a strident anti-Catholicism, which served to protect the sovereignty of the British parliamentary monarchy and define the political frontier between European dogma and English qualities of liberty and equality; (2) pride in being at the heart of the civilization that was the British Empire; and (3) a long series of wars against Spain, the Dutch Republic, France and Germany (Colley, 1992; Evans, 2013; Hobsbawm, 1968). Although perhaps none of these discursive elements directly applies to today’s reality, the folk myth of England as the heart of the elected nation Great Britain – superior to continental Europe in its creative abilities, economic soundness and democratic instincts – remains at the heart of English ressentiment.

Anti-European discourse has gone relatively unchallenged, if not continuously reinvented, by England’s media and the two main political parties since the 1960s - preventing the emergence of a serious agonistic space about the relation between a vigorous English democracy and European democracy. Party leaders fought against the idea of the EU as a more modern platform than the Commonwealth to voice English people’s antagonisms and desire for a renewed balance between liberty and equality. Moreover, they consistently nipped in the bud the legitimacy of those few and far between who dared to present the EU as a potential platform to modernize historical English antagonisms and achieve a new democratic settlement.

While Tory ambivalence towards EU membership\(^2\) and the anti-Europeanism of the English popular press have been amply discussed (Anderson and Weymouth, 1999), the Labour Party’s contribution to the pre-emption of an agonistic English-European debate has received less attention. However, Labour’s thinking on Europe since the 1960s has been at best unimaginative and at worst antagonistic (Broad and Daddow, 2010; Thompson, 2011). Churchill’s ‘three circles’
approach — providing a ranking of imperial priorities — provided the continuity between Gaitskell’s and Wilson’s Old Labour discourse, and the Blair/Brown New Labour discourse.

Gaitskell argued famously that British membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) would result in the ‘end of a thousand years of history … And it does mean the end of the Commonwealth’ (Gaitskell, 1962: 8). Similarly, Tony Benn explained the lack of appeal of the EEC as an expression of the inviolability of Britain’s borders since 1066 - portraying the EEC as a recreation of the Holy Roman Empire (Benn, 1970). And, while Blair campaigned against European membership in the 1970s, he and his successor, Brown, closed down ‘Europe’ rhetorically, cementing the political frontier between Britain and the EEC/EU in many policy areas. Aloof from a European social-democratic project with unconvincing continental European leaders, New Labour ministers explicitly accepted the role of a junior US partner in accelerating the globalization – Americanization – of the domestic policy regime (Panitch, 2000: 13). Finally, while Jeremy Corbyn states publicly that he voted remain, he was at his most unforthcoming in his discourse on the virtues of a co-evolving English and European democracy beyond the old political frontier.

In summary, the creation of an agonistic space of possible complementarities between an English and a European democracy was suppressed by the failure of English elites to repudiate increasingly irrelevant antagonisms – anti-Catholicism, the civilizing effects of the Empire and intra-European wars. Perversely, maintaining the old political frontier with Europe pre-empted the timely creation of an agonistic debate on English post-imperial identity. The passage in 1981 of the British Nationality Act, signalled the end of the British Empire. The genie was out of the bottle: the need for a new English civilizing mission could no longer be denied. Yet, the inability of the English elites to create a post-imperial agonistic space in the 1960s and 1970s, and Thatcher’s addition of a new anti-European dimension to a nascent English nationalism in the 1980s, provided a unique opportunity for populists from organizations, such as the UK Independent Party (UKIP), to revive old antagonisms and shape English identity as Euroscepticism.

Instead of facing up to its neo-imperial demons in a constructive, agonistic fashion, the English populist movement made reference to Britain’s imperial past to portray ‘Europe’ as the ultimate institutional expression of contemporary British and English decline (Wellings, 2012). Why should the Dutch, French and Spanish – past foes – have a say in England’s future? Also, why should Malta or Belgium – the former a past member of the Empire, the latter co-created by imperial British leaders – have a say? Thus, English populism increasingly became Euroscepticism – a symbol of the historical decline of British sovereignty with which English sovereignty historically was associated. UKIP’s toxic brand of populism built, also, on the immigration-sceptic and parliamentary sovereignty-centred chain of equivalence proposed by Powell and Thatcher. Enoch Powell’s antagonism against immigrants articulated sadness at the demise of Britain’s empire and a romantic view of ‘a bemused, resentful people conscious of having lost their place in history’ (Roberts, 2012: 128). In addition, Powell (1975) breathed new life into Britain’s imperial past by reinventing parliamentary sovereignty as ‘the fact for which men have fought and died, that the laws in their country are made only by the institutions of their country and in Britain that they are made only by the parliamentary institutions of our country’. Similarly, Thatcher linked the demise of Great Britain to ‘the enemy within’, namely, the minorities threatening to ‘swamp’ British ethnic essence. The EEC, for its part, was an alien power that increasingly eroded superior British traditions of individual liberty, most notably parliamentary sovereignty (Thatcher, 1995: 743). When Tony Blair (2006) warned of growing ‘resentment that our very openness, our willingness to welcome difference … is being used against us, abused, indeed, in order to harm us’ (Holmes, 2009: 75), he was arguing for a return to the British historical values of democracy and liberty, rather than a future of Europewide solutions.
All these tokens of historical reversal continued the pre-emption of an agonistic democratic debate about how best to provide meaning to parliamentary democracy, liberty and equality in a 21st century where the powerlessness of individual European nations is increasingly clear (Hensmans, 2010: 333). Suppression of agonistic debate enabled UKIP to concentrate on European immigration as the focal point of English powerlessness. Long suppressed and long built-up English resentment about the loss of a civilizing mission translated into a remarkable reversal of values towards the EU. The major mistake of the EU was to try to establish and scale up the very virtues that English neo-imperial discourse revered but was unable to deliver in the 21st century (i.e. a geopolitically leading model of liberty, equality and parliamentary democracy). In many ways, the Brexit vote symbolized English refusal to break the old chain of equivalence and create a new political frontier that would defend the virtues of parliamentary democracy, freedom and equality, on a sufficiently meaningful scale to withstand emerging authoritarian forces.

The financial crisis has further exacerbated long-standing tensions in the EU; notably between the European logic of socio-economic integration, the German ‘ordoliberal’ logic of austerity which pre-empted the building of European solidarity mechanisms, the French logic of statism and the British geopolitical logic of splendid detachment (Dinan, 2014). This last logic seeks to maintain the divide among European powers and to sustain the continuity of the Anglosphere – home to liberty, low government interference and an English-speaking Christian community (Bennett, 2007; Gamble, 2007: 13). In face of these tensions, the EU failed to progress towards a socio-economic agenda that addressed both the ideal of European mobility and growth and the reality of emotionally ingrained national identities and social security provisions. The resulting technocratic policy of (neo)liberalism by default consistently pre-empted Europewide populist opportunities – in effect closing off the public sphere to civil society actors (Medrano, 2009: 90). At the same time, uncompromising British austerity measures, introduced in the wake of the most recent financial crisis, aggravated English ressentiment (Wahl, 2017); austerity has been found to be strongly and causally associated to support for a leave vote (Fetzer, 2018).

On these varied tensions, British politicians across the political spectrum – Tories, Labour and UKIP – built a chain of equivalence between immigration, austerity and British community traditions (Gietel-Basten, 2016). The National Health Service (NHS) – an institution infused with almost sacred popular emotionality – epitomized the emerging political discourse of ‘overstretching’ by foreigners, championed by UKIP and the Tory Party – and sometimes shared explicitly by the Labour Party (Toynbee, 2017). First, austerity did not allow for a larger public budget for the NHS. Second, the large influx of immigrants threatened the viability of the NHS budget – the essence of British community. Finally, the more toxic form of populism that emerged culminated in a vote for Brexit. While our aim is not to engage in an argument over the wisdom or folly of this choice, the case of Brexit highlights the historical building of ressentiment, in which the long-term suppression of ‘irrational’ and ‘unreasonable’ English populism by an all-conquering British imperial discourse, transformed populism’s potentially virtuous agonistic effects into an often anachronistic, toxic and badly aimed ressentiment against the EU.

Epilogue: agonistic populism, business schools and the NHS

Overall, instead of viewing Brexit as either a huge mistake which should be reversed as soon as possible, or a final farewell, we see the following years as an opportunity for the emergence of an English agonistic debate about a new post-imperial, civilizing mission and identity. How can the civilizing greatness that English people justifiably long for (Kumar, 2003) be developed without it being subordinated to outdated and ill-directed imperial ideas? Such a redirection of English popular demand is needed urgently and, thus, opens the door to a more constructive populism. Great
Britain faces the prospect of renegotiating its domestic multinational constitution, most notably in relation to Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Scottish people have gone a long way in developing a positive identity beyond imperial history and are searching for a place in broader multinational entities such as the EU (e.g. Marr, 1995). The coming years will provide a unique window of opportunity to get rid of the imperative to shed elements of English identity that might antagonize Scottish and Irish popular will (Kumar, 2006) and instead to develop the long suppressed English popular will into a new and constructive civilizing mission. Doing so could free England from the Thatcherian equivalential chain of social (and Scottish) equality measures and alien European encroachment, enabling creative solutions to long-held English problems of inequality at the heart of anti-immigrant populism.

Clearly, this process will be long and difficult. We see a clear link between the simultaneous development of a British and European agonistic space, which requires the dialectic and creative exploration of tensions (e.g. between elitism and populism, nationalism and globalism, or liberty and equality). Achieving civilization greatness – the shared goal of both Britain and the EU – entails facing the grand challenges of our age, such as social inequality, immigration, climate change and a more sustainable type of capitalism. Drawing on the same technocratic neoliberal market logic to solve the problems that it caused for the EU and Britain, is hardly going to work. However, the EU is home to a deeply rooted variety of potentially antagonistic, but coexisting traditions of democratic government – statism, liberalism, social democracy, communism – providing a potentially useful agonistic antidote for old imperial and colonial reflexes. At the same time, technocratic and geopolitical priorities have pre-empted tangible civilizational projects that translate deep-felt ‘left behind’ sentiments into health, work and culture projects that join elites and non-elites at the hip. Alternative European voices have yet to manage to take advantage of socio-historical opportunities to build an alternative to the liberalizing effects of ‘integration through law’ (Jabko, 2006; Scharpf, 2010).

How can (British) business school scholars contribute to the realization of Britain’s agonistic potential and creation, jointly or in parallel with its European neighbours, of alternative democratic solutions? To date, business and management schools all too often function as technocratic mouthpieces for neoliberal solutions (Parker, 2018) or as vehicles sustaining attitudes of happy managerial mediocrity rather than challenging the status quo (Grey, 2004). In relation to Brexit, British business schools’ championing of the Global Britain project – opening to lucrative new global markets outside the EU, most notably authoritarian entities such as Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates – contrasts with their mostly pro-European discourse. This raises questions about whether the UK university system and business schools in particular, implicitly are endorsing the Brexiteers’ imperial nostalgia by choosing to champion a mainly instrumental, money-driven global project. To transcend this image of business schools as pseudo-scientific money machines (Pfeffer and Fong, 2004), unquestioning cash cows of underfunded universities (Tiratsoo, 2004) and the purposeless cheerleaders of the great and good of the business world (Parker, 2018), management scholars have been calling for their peers to tackle vital grand challenges (George, 2014; Hamel, 2009). These calls are echoed by observations that even the more critically oriented journals, such as Organization aims to be, include few articles addressing issues of wider public importance (Dunne et al., 2008; Spicer et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding the challenges, management scholars, spurred on by those critical management scholars willing to mainstream their expertise on the ‘elites versus people’ fault line, are in a good position to shape the agonistic potential of today’s societies and their organizations (see also Bristow and Robinson, 2018; De Cleen et al., 2018), despite having failed to engage much with the EU as a political institution to date (Grey, 2018). To contribute effectively to organizational solutions to grand challenges, management schools and journals will have to open up to a variety of
populist voices that openly challenge their depoliticized raison d’être, including the technocratic hegemony of publications driven by incremental managerial research questions and sponsoring based on celebration of the great, good and successful of the business world.

What if business schools were to become catalysts for the translation of popular ressentiment towards elitist immorality into new moral categories of organizing, that is, experiments with structures and organizations that bind elites and non-elites in tide-turning resource- and purpose-sharing commitments – popular ‘pacts’ regarding the relation between labour (immigration) and capital, education (social innovation) and power, health and wealth and corporate and income taxation? Institutionally, this might imply the creation of an alternative business school (Parker, 2018) or university department concept that focuses on building expertise in projects on the ‘elites versus people’ fault line, prompting elites and non-elites to see eye to eye and translate deep-felt sentiments into binding action. Identitywise, this might imply academics moving beyond the focus on top-tier journal publications and instead measure part of their worth in terms of their capacity to become public intellectuals (Dallyn et al., 2015) and public facilitators of passionate agonism (between researchers, students, activists, social movements, businesses and policy makers) also.

To further illustrate the above with an example, the NHS could be the quintessential case that (British) business schools and organizational scholars could exploit to reinvent themselves. Business school studies of the NHS to date tend to focus on attempts to make the organization more business-like through the introduction of technocratic management techniques (Ham, 2018; Ham et al., 2011; McCann et al., 2015; Pettigrew et al., 1992). Arguably these attempts at incremental improvements have failed to avert the current British care crisis and become the seeds of a toxic, anti-immigration discourse. Instead of focusing on technocratic questions such as how the NHS can combine austerity with service level improvements through greater personal accountability, fiscal discipline and net present health value, scholars should focus on renewal of the NHS’s popular and moral foundations.8 The history of the NHS epitomizes how populist aspirations that carry great emotional fervour – ‘give us the greater equality promised during WWII’ – can be used to overcome vested elite interests and launch an organizational experiment with unique human and organizational development ambitions.

The NHS, once, was recognized as the outstanding example of ‘socialized medicine’ by its European neighbours, and as ‘the most civilised achievement of modern Government’ by British leaders (Webster, 2002: 1). The pivotal ‘£350 m back to the NHS’ promise in the Brexit campaign illustrates how the NHS to this day is what comes closest to an English national ‘religion’.9 Official history10 claims that the institution was born out of a long-held ideal that good health care should be available to all, regardless of wealth, and that people pay into it according to their means. 11 Closer to reality is that leaders, such as Bevan, activated deep-felt pockets of ressentiment and bundled them in a populist chain of equivalence with a fervour so overwhelming that an immense collective action problem was finally solved: how to reconcile the separate ideals and vested interests of medical professionals, parliamentary factions, wealthy industrialists and impoverished working classes in one moral category.

The NHS thus is a story of the timely translation of popular ressentiment into a new moral category – affordable health care for all and paid for by all, the strongest shoulders bearing the heaviest burden. This remarkable achievement has arguably made the NHS one of the few symbols of Western ‘democracy as civilization’ that has stood the test of time abroad and at home. The civilization virtues of Brexit’s neo-imperial discourse – sovereignty, democracy, liberty – have been discredited as colonialism or free market austerity that serves the privileged. By contrast, the NHS, born out of a passionate reality check of the people after consecutive Empire-protecting wars, to this day provides substance to ‘democracy as civilization’ claims. When people’s deep-felt grievances are translated in a development and organizational change project that forces elites and non-elites to
see eye to eye in a core part of their daily life, antagonism makes way for agonism, ressentiment is transformed, and moral organizational categories are created that pass the test of time.

Management scholars in general, and critical management scholars in particular, possess the expertise and tools to help direct away current populist discourse, about for instance the NHS, from toxic ressentiment. Scholars can examine how populist discourse can instead be used more productively – to build a chain of equivalence so overwhelming that it manages to convince the rich and powerful to supersede their vested interests and the disenfranchised to abandon value-reversing contempt, in favour of a new moral approach that stands the test of time. The NHS is drawn on here as a quintessential example, but scholars could also constructively intervene in debates around, for instance, social inequality, climate change and global capitalism. Contributing to such collective action questions – how to make populism a force for good – could help management scholars reinvent themselves as actors relevant to the most existential question threatening Western democracies and corporations: how to use popular ressentiment to induce the creation of collective development and change vehicles embraced across the elite/non-elite divide.

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Notes

1. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue that to gain maximum emotional resonance contradictions should be grounded in binary oppositions that best reflect emerging common denominators in popular opinion. Thus, they argue that a major reason for the growth of Thatcherism in the 1980s was the Conservative party's capacity to articulate the increasing unease of the public with collectivist policies. In particular, the Conservatives successfully contrasted the notions of ‘consumer’ and ‘bureaucrat’, ‘market’ and ‘state’, ‘individual’ and ‘society’.

2. Starting with the Aliens Act of 1905, which targeted Jews in particular and which sought to give the English people ‘protection against foreigners’ and to ‘safeguard their duties’, the Conservatives systematically wielded the antinational argument to marginalize Labour (e.g. the 1928 ‘What Conservatives have done for British workers’, Conservative Political Centre Handbook). Fear of ‘aliens’ culminated in Enoch Powell’s calls in the 1960s to halt immigration. The doctrine of ‘Powellism’ – a combination of demands for national sovereignty and anti-immigration plus residual beliefs in an Empire – has surfaced regularly over the years.

3. Great Britain stands ‘at the very point of junction’ between three circles:

   the first circle for us naturally is the British Commonwealth and Empire, with all that that comprises. Then there is also the English-speaking World in which we, Canada, and the other British Dominions and the United States play so important a part. And finally there is United Europe. (Winston S. Churchill, ‘Conservative Mass Meeting: speech at Llandudno, 9 October 1948’, Europe Unite: speeches 1947 & 1948, London: Cassell, 1950, pp. 416–418, https://web-archives.univ-pau.fr/english/special/SRdoc1.pdf)

4. Churchill did not see a weakened post-World War II Europe as threatening the primacy of the British Empire.

5. http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485; These remarks were translated into the 1981 British Nationality Act, which for the first time defined British citizenship – associating it to historical ties of blood.

6. By contrast, the Scots and Irish showed a disposition to exit the United Kingdom and make their own arrangements with the European Commission and European Parliament (Kumar, 2006).

7. Certainly, we would not argue that the EU is flawless and not worthy of critique or resentment. As rightfully noted by an anonymous reviewer, the EU can be seen as a central player in the current neoliberal
consensus, and frequent critique of its democratic deficit, inefficiencies and expansive policy-tendencies, for instance, seem not unfounded. At the same time, English populism reveres caricatures of the EU, further highlighting the complex EU–UK relations.

8. Possibly, Scottish populist fervour led Scottish nationalist leaders to go against Westminster-based regulation and return to the ‘age-old’ Scottish system of democratic intellectualism and common sense, and greater ‘equality of opportunity through public provision’ (Kay et al., 1998: 659). These calls for a Scottish civilization based on a Scottish NHS – a symbol of greater national solidarity and equal public provision – somewhat remarkably, received help from the British Treasury (Bruce and Forbes, 2001; Hunter and Williamson, 1991: 167; Stewart, 2003).

9. https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/nhs-crisis-jeremy-hunt-health-service-religion-privatise-to-save-it-a7567056.html; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/03/nhs-religion-tories-health-service.

10. https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/about-the-nhs/the-nhs/ (accessed on 31 January 2019).

11. https://www.nhs.uk/Tools/Documents/HistoryNHS.html (accessed on 30 September 2018).

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