

**Who's in Charge Here?**  
**How Partisan Publics Conceptualise 'The Elite' in Red Wall England**

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### Abstract

Opposition to 'the elite' is crucial to the populist turns shaping twenty-first century politics, yet little is known about how publics understand the concept. This thesis examines how politically active residents of the Red Wall region of England conceptualise individuals, groups and institutions who hold power, and the consequences for their worldviews. I make three contributions to the sociological literature. (1) A new schema for characterising the elites described in public discourse as exemplars of 'folk mereology' (Rose & Schaffer 2017). (2) The first empirical evidence that folk theories of elite power structure the worldviews of partisan publics. (3) A novel interpretation of Brexit and its successor parties' persistent electoral strength in Red Wall England. Data was generated via semi-structured interviews with thirty-six participants recruited from parties on the left, right and centre of the region's political mainstream. Left-wing participants conceived the elite as a cohesive 'establishment' concentrated at the apex of British society. Conversely, conservatives and liberals described a loosely-connected network of autonomous, high-achieving individuals dispersed across many social domains. I argue these distinct 'mental maps' of society were influential on participants' broader worldviews in two main ways. First, populist sentiment was strongest among participants who conceived the elite as one and many simultaneously—a dual perspective that allowed the elite to function as 'nodal point' and 'empty signifier' in Brexit discourse (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Second—irrespective of political orientation—monist accounts of the elite often accompanied calls for elite power to be redistributed. These findings complicate interpretations of Brexit support in the Red Wall as a straightforward 'rightward turn' by an historically left-leaning region. The elites described by Brexit's most enthusiastic supporters suggested an at-least-somewhat egalitarian desire for redistribution of power, albeit an exclusionary form localised within the national borders affirmed by the referendum result.

### **Author’s Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and that I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references. Material in the thesis has been presented for publication as follows:

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

### 1.1 God save the King

This thesis investigates the role that ideas about ‘the elite’ play in political thought in the North of England after Brexit. Elites are typically defined as any section of society which, for whatever reason, enjoys privileges and powers denied to everyone else (Nadel 1956, Mills 1956, Dahl 1958, Bottomore 1964, Sartori 1976, Zannoni 1978, Savage & Williams 2008, Scott 2008, Smith 2024). Although the concept can be summed up in a few words, our ideas about the elite can be deceptively complex. This is partly because they are not entirely our own. As Nairn put it (1964:17-19), our notions of power and those who hold it are mentally, discursively and socially constructed from ‘a cultural tissue of great variety and subtlety that extends all the way from the education of infants to the naming of streets.’

Nairn maintained that this cultural tissue was thickest in Britain, and especially England, because the country’s uniquely persistent monarchy remains so visible in everyday life. Chambers (1993:146) concurs that ‘British political culture, and the particularly English hegemony ... at its heart’ is built upon the consecration of a set of elite ‘relics, traditions, and shrines’ that include ‘Westminster, the monarchy, Oxbridge, the Royal Navy, [and] the public school system.’ An elitist streak is thus present in the ‘daily conversations, advertising campaigns, movies, political speeches and tourism brochures’ that cultivate and maintain Britain’s national self-image (Thurlow & Jaworski 2017:246). For Nairn, the nation’s psyches are thus ‘intimately burdened down by ... a tradition of the dead generations weighing like a nightmare on the brain of the living, present in their inhibitions and mental blocs as well as what they profess to believe.’ On this telling, the ideas our societies construct about elites become part of our very identities.

I was reminded of these passages when I witnessed the coronation of King Charles III spark an argument in a Yorkshire pub in the late afternoon of Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> May 2023. I had stopped in to The Knavesmire to watch a football match between Liverpool and Brentford. A group of young revellers booed the national anthem in jest during the pre-match hype, prompting an angry response from an older man at the bar incensed at their disrespect. The dispute was a microcosm of one that played out across the country that weekend as *God Save the King* was played at public gatherings to mark the new King's accession. Some football fans chose to boo the anthem, mostly in the North West of England. The next day, by way of response, fans in the South East sang the anthem with extra gusto<sup>1</sup>.

**Figure 1. Pitchside populism<sup>2</sup>**



A minor media furore rumbled over the next few days. Everyone was talking about the same elite figure, but few could agree whether the new King belonged to 'us' or 'them.' Simon Jordan, the wealthy cellular phone magnate and former owner of Crystal Palace FC, denounced the boos on his nationally syndicated *TalkSport* radio show. From his perspective,

<sup>1</sup> BBC Sport (2023). Sport pays coronation tribute to King Charles III. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/65510193> [Accessed 22 Nov. 2024].

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press (2019).

the fans had done nothing but embarrass themselves, their football clubs and their country. As Jordan discussed the case with his co-hosts, he equated the booing supporters with all that was wrong with the world—specifically minority groups and climate activists:

*Were they wrong to do it, Simon?*

SJ: Yes I think they were because they are trying to hijack something the majority of people want to celebrate. Our national anthem should bring people together not divide us.

*But there is such thing as freedom of opinion, surely?*

SJ: Well yes and there's also such thing as respecting the majority. If I'm invited to a party and I hate the person whose party I'm going to, I wouldn't go to that party.

*It's not really the same thing is it.*

SJ: It's *exactly* the same thing.

Martin Keown interjected that dissent could be tolerated when pitched at a sensible volume ('could they not just have silently protest (sic)? Do they have to make such a booing noise?'), prompting a subtly enflamed Jordan to hit back at his broadcast colleague:

SJ: There is a level of protest and democracy that they're entitled to but they're pushing it, Martin. They glue themselves to buildings. They shut down roads so that people can't get to hospital. They enforce their minority views on us and try to create a different culture in this country. It's nothing to do with politics but they are making it political under the auspices of freedom of speech. Well not without freedom of consequence.

It seems, then, that a lot can be inferred from our attitudes about 'the elite.' In Jordan's mind, a shared disposition toward the British establishment had fused fans of football and the Earth's atmosphere into a unitary 'they' intent on ripping up the cultural tissue described by Nairn.

He responded on behalf of an imagined 'us' that included 'the majority of people' but not, presumably, those with a different national anthem, nor those who consider God Save the King an imperialist dirge. The ideological clash conjured up by the broadcast posed questions about the limits of democracy, the consequences entailed when freedom of speech upsets a helpless head of state, the pros and cons of allowing minority groups to attend our parties, and the ethics of politicising so apolitical an event as the coronation of a hereditary monarch.

apparent In the Knavesmire and over the airwaves, the cultural split I glimpsed that afternoon suggests that our ideas about the elite play a role in the implicit in-group/out-group distinctions that make up our political worldviews (Mouffe 2005:100). The boos were loudest in historically Labour-voting cities, and the royalist response led by fans of the only Premier League football club located in a Conservative constituency<sup>3</sup>. Fan perceptions of power and the powerful also appeared to be influenced by geography (Massey 1995:11). The protest and subsequent counter-protest broadly reproduced the North/South divide of the 2016 Brexit referendum—the high-watermark of British anti-elitism in the first quarter of the twenty-first century (Freedon 2016).

The anthem dispute touched on a complex web of issues including place, politics, tradition, class, nation, identity, equality, democracy, monarchy, populism, peoples, others and elites. I reflected on all these themes in the months that followed as I travelled around the North of England looking for answers to two questions. How do people form their ideas about elites? And what are the political implications? As I went, I spoke with thirty-six people from towns that supported Brexit in relatively high numbers, known collectively as 'the Red Wall' (Kanagasooriam & Simon 2021). Each participant was an active member of a political party at the left, right or centre of British politics.

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<sup>3</sup> Dubas-Fisher, D. (2015). *Labour romp to victory in football club constituency stakes*. [online] The Mirror. Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/general-election-2015-labour-romp-5661167> [Accessed 22 Nov. 2024].

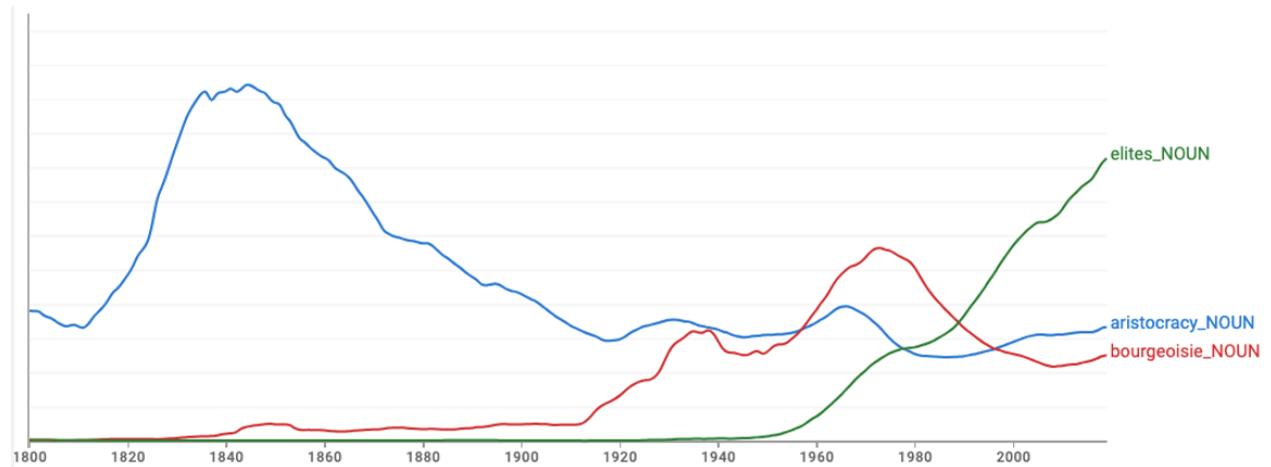
I asked them who counted as an elite in contemporary Britain, the sentiments they held towards them, and how they would change things if they had the chance. Some perceived a sharp distinction between an illegitimate elite and the rest of society. Others felt that elites were much like everyone else. Still others that society had lost its way because too much power had been ceded by the elite to the people. In what follows, I detail the continuities and distinctions between the elite concepts constructed by participants from the same geographic region but distinct political backgrounds. I conclude that the elite occupy an important place in the mental maps that structure our everyday experience of politics.

This introductory chapter explores how and why the elite concept became so prominent in public discourse and the steps taken by this thesis to better understand its role in twenty-first century politics. First, I explore the increase in public discourse-about-elites documented around the world in recent decades. Second, I introduce Rose & Schaffer's (2017) concept of folk mereology to help explain why the elite is such a fiercely contested and politically potent concept.. Finally, I detail the specific research questions explored by this thesis, the specific gaps in our knowledge they were designed to address, and a brief overview of each chapter contained in this thesis, from literature review to data collection and analysis.

## 1.2 What we talk about when we talk about elites

Simon Jordan is not the only person with something to say about elites. Since the turn of the millennium, no other social group has been mentioned as frequently in Anglophone literature as 'the elite' (Figure 2). Little discussed before the 1950s, in recent decades the elite has become a central archetype of global politics. Yet little is known about how publics understand the concept, whether it retains a consistent meaning in different regions of the world, or whether it performs a distinct function to the terms used to describe the powerful in previous eras such as 'aristocracy,' 'ruling class' and 'bourgeoisie.' These were each central concerns of a 2008 special issue of *The Sociological Review* (eds. Savage & Williams), whose subtitle lamented that elites had been 'remembered in capitalism and forgotten by social science.' As the global financial crash unfolded, the authors attributed our forgetfulness to two factors – the complex elite configurations wrought by the financialisation of power in the neoliberal era, and the deconstruction of the elite concept by poststructuralism (Savage & Williams 2008). How could we remember elites if we no longer agreed what they were?

Public discourse about elites grew precipitously from the 1980s onward. The term was usually invoked as a pejorative and its newfound prevalence coincided with an anti-elitist turn in global politics (Du Gay 2008:80). A succession of 'populist waves' attained power in practically every region of the globe by antagonizing 'the elite' on behalf of 'the people' (Dean 2020:6). Populists were elected to executive office in five of the seven largest democracies (Brazil, India, Mexico, the Philippines and the USA; Mudde 2019). A series of revolutions that came to be known as the first and second Arab Springs in 2011 and 2018 deposed ruling elites in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq and Algeria (Ali 2019). In South America, a 'pink tide' of left-wing populists claimed power in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela (Ellner 2019). And anti-elitists of one type or another received a quarter of all votes cast in parliamentary elections in Europe in 2018 (Lewis et al 2018).

**Figure 2. References to elites in Anglophone literature<sup>4</sup> (1800-2022)**

All these movements were anti-elite, but each conceptualised the elite in a characteristic way. Left-wing populisms tend to denounce the elite's neoliberal avarice, while right-wing variants typically object to the elite's embrace of multiculturalism and globalism (De Cleen 2019:31). Public discourse frequently qualifies the elite concept by time (new/old), space (local/national/global), field (political/corporate/cultural/military/knowledge), degree (super/ultra/counter), power (governing/ruling) and visibility (invisible/hidden/shadow elite) (Howard & Kenway 2015:1016). The category can thus refer to elected politicians, economic leaders, civil servants, journalists, intellectuals, artists, academics, state institutions, supra-national institutions such as the EU, NGOs and/or business people (Jagers & Walgrave 2007, Mudde 2007, Bonikowski 2017, De Cleen 2017). The elite concept has therefore been termed 'the quintessential floating signifier ... deployed all over the place and for all sorts of rhetorical effects' (Thurlow & Jaworski 2017a:243).

No matter how self-evident the elite status of any given group might appear, the elite concept is always a matter of (inter-)subjective judgement rather than an objective sociological category (Laclau 1977, Zannoni 1978, Panizza 2005, De Cleen 2019). Anti-elitism has therefore

<sup>4</sup> Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer [[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=aristocracy\\_NOUN%2Cbourgeoisie\\_NOUN%2Celites\\_NOUN&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2022&corpus=en](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=aristocracy_NOUN%2Cbourgeoisie_NOUN%2Celites_NOUN&year_start=1800&year_end=2022&corpus=en)].



been paired with all manner of political projects throughout its history. Early examples tended to pursue egalitarian ends. Sovereignty was first identified with 'the people' during the French Revolution (Lefort 2009), but the first examples of populism in the contemporary sense of the word were the US People's Party (Frank 2020) and the Russian Narodniki (Smith 2003), both of which emerged in the late nineteenth century. The former was an agrarian movement against metropolitan defenders of the gold standard, the latter an alliance between peasantry and intelligentsia against the Tsar.

Britain has a significant history of anti-elite, populist mobilisation, which some trace back to the egalitarian Leveller and Chartist movements of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively (Stedman-Jones 1983). However, in Britain as elsewhere (Funke et al 2020), the most electorally successful examples of twenty-first century populism have usually been associated with the political right (Hall 1979, Iakhnis *et al* 2018). This may be partly due to the 'populist hype' (Glynos & Mondon 2019) produced by ubiquitous media portrayals of reactionary Euro-American populisms in the early decades of the twenty-first century. By conflating populism and nativism in the public imagination, this coverage may constrain left-wing attempts at constructing an inclusionary, egalitarian alternative (Stavrakakis 2017).

That said, their anti-elite posture means even reactionary populisms often speak the language of egalitarianism (Derks 2006), even if it rarely aligns with economic analyses of their record in government (e.g. Funke et al 2024). The precise left/right alignment of populist movements can therefore be difficult to discern. For instance, in Britain, anti-elite discourse reached an apotheosis at the 2016 Brexit referendum (Koller 2019) such that the Cambridge Dictionary chose 'populism' as its word of the year (Mudde 2017). Brexit is typically seen as a canonical example of right-wing populism (Freedon 2016), yet it enjoyed significant cross-party support. A third of those who voted for left-of-centre parties at the 2015 UK General Election also supported Brexit one year later. Among these parties, Brexit support ranged from 25% of Greens to 37% of Labour supporters (Ashcroft, 2016). This voting bloc of 5 million people was

around four times the size of the Leave campaign's margin of victory and thus among the determinants of the referendum result.

The broader Brexit coalition was largely made up of affluent Eurosceptics and older members of Britain's working class (Goodwin & Eatwell 2018:21-22), spread rather unevenly across the United Kingdom. The relatively strong Brexit support in the so-called 'Red Wall' of historically Labour-voting towns in the North of England was particularly bruising for the left, interpreted by some as a rebellion by the Labour's erstwhile working-class base (O'Donnell, 2021). The elites opposed by the Brexit narrative included 'Brussels bureaucrats' atop the European Union, as well as an 'expert class' centered around a Westminster establishment felt to be out of touch with the British people and guilty of favouritism toward immigrant populations (Clarke & Newman 2017, Enoch 2017, Lueg & Hartmann 2017).

In the Red Wall, the elite concept was also a vehicle for resentment against the relative affluence of South East England (Cooper & Cooper 2020), particularly London (Rothery 2021), as well as 'the young, quinoa-eating, graduate, city-dwelling, socially liberal Remainers and Labour voters who ... do not put Britain first' (Mattinson 2020:227). Alongside the nativist aspects of Brexit, ethnographic research in Red Wall towns also reveals 'a passionate desire for economic redistribution' to redress unjust concentrations of power and opportunity in 'those regions that have benefitted in the past at the Red Walls expense' (Mattinson 2020:230).

These sentiments have roots in the political geography of The North of England which, in the nineteenth century, was the primary site of an industrial revolution that generated significant economic power (Anderson 1964). In recent decades, deindustrialisation has drained power away from the North and reduced the number of manufacturing, mining and industrial jobs available across the region (Beatty & Fothergill 2020, Raikes *et al* 2019). The contemporary North of England has lower life

expectancy (Bright 2021), household income (Raikes *et al* 2019:11) and access to public transport (Mattinson 2020:19) than the South. England's North-South divide thus represents 'the most potent example of regional inequality against any comparable advanced economy' (Hooper 2023:37).

The elite did not, however, play a straightforward villainous role in the Brexit story. Mattinson (2020) notes that some elite figures were seen as the protagonists of Brexit—singling out then-future British Prime Minister Boris Johnson as one of several 'Old Etonians who ... came to the forefront of British public life' (Smith 2024:342) immediately before and after the Brexit vote. Johnson's advocacy for Brexit has also been cited as a 'populism of the privileged' (De Cleen & Ruiz Casado 2023:1006). That is, anti-elite rhetoric advanced by figures 'who themselves hol[d] positions of significant power and hai[l] from well-to-do families, elite schools, universities and student associations' (*ibid.*). The Brexit narrative pitted distinct elite factions against each other and was thus contingent on a pluralist understanding of the elite as a network of autonomous power centres.

This observation cuts against the insistence of some scholars that populism necessarily conceives the elite as a monolithic whole (e.g. Mudde 2004:543), and therefore warrants examination. However, as in populism studies more broadly, scholars have paid greater attention to the nationalistic 'people' than the folk theory of elite power constructed by pro-Brexit discourse. Every major party officially opposed Brexit, but some individual MPs came out in support— including a third of Conservatives. Drawing on an older tradition of euroscepticism that had been hegemonic on the British left in the 1970s<sup>5</sup> (Nairn 1973), a smaller number of Labour MPs argued in favour of 'Lexit' (Seymour 2019:23). That is, a left-wing version of Brexit that re-imagined the nation state as a

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<sup>5</sup> To which then-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn reportedly remained sympathetic (Pogrud & Maguire 2020:390-391).

‘breakwater’ against the perennial bourgeois drive for frictionless movement of people, goods, and currency facilitated by Britain’s participation in an intra-continental common market (Anderson 2020:42).

Talk of a straightforward ‘rightward drift’ tends, then, to oversimplify the fundamentally ‘vertical’ antagonism between people and elite definitionally present in all populist movements (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017). Still, it is reasonable to ask whether the nativist tone of many successful twenty-first century populisms means that contemporary articulations of the elite concept are somehow more compatible with the politics of the far-right than those that came before. This semiotic question has received little attention in the predominantly quantitative-positivist examinations of recent populist waves. Since Hawkins *et al*’s (2012) influential *Measuring Populist Attitudes*, a huge volume of survey instruments have tracked the ebbs and flows of anti-elite sentiment all around the world. These studies suggest that the degree of anti-elitism in global politics appears to have grown in recent decades. However, they do not typically assess how respondents conceptualise the elite, nor how their concepts differ with political orientation. More often, they assume that the elites mentioned in their surveys connote the same sociological groups as the elites conceived by respondents. This approach may misconstrue the elite concept, which is politically consequential precisely because it represents different ideas in different contexts.

There has thus been little empirical investigation of whether and how elite concepts differ with political orientation. In Britain, a 2019 YouGov poll asked respondents to indicate who they considered members of the British ‘ruling class.’ Most agreed that MPs, CEOs and Bankers made up the British elite, although conservatives were less likely to label social groups as elites overall. These results provide some indication of *who* the public consider the elite, and that left-leaning respondents may hold stronger feelings on the matter. However,

participants were only able to choose between twelve preselected candidate groups<sup>6</sup>. The results thus reveal little about the elite's place in respondents' mental maps of British society. It is this insight that this thesis hopes to provide.

Despite the elite's increasing prominence in public discourse, the heterogeneity of anti-elite movements, and their possible slide toward the political right – the elite remains 'under-theorised' as an object of political discourse (Moffitt & Tormey 2014, Moffitt 2016, Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, Bergman 2018, De Cleen 2019). Moreover, theorisation is constrained by the concept's close association with populism. Although most definitions notionally treat the elite and the people as equal partners in the populist narrative, populism studies has tended to subordinate the former to the latter—relegating the elite to a conceptual residue leftover once the people has been formed. Moreover, few have examined the concept as a component of non-populist discourses that normalise or valorise, rather than antagonize, the elite (De Cleen 2019:30). Indeed, gathering this literature together is difficult because its natural name—'elite discourse'—conventionally refers to discourse *between* rather than *about* elites (Thurlow & Jaworski 2017).

This thesis examines how members of parties at the left, right and centre of British politics in Red Wall towns conceptualise the elite, and the implications for their broader worldviews. It makes three contributions to the sociological literature:

1. A new schema for interpreting the elites described by public discourse by their degree of cohesion (monist/pluralist).
2. The first empirical evidence that folk theories of elite power structure the social worldviews of partisan publics.
3. A novel interpretation of Brexit and its successor parties' continuing electoral strength in contemporary Red Wall England.

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<sup>6</sup> MPs, CEOs, Bankers, Newspaper editors, Civil servants, Doctors, Scientists, TV personalities, Journalists, Police officers, Teachers, Supermarket workers.

My analysis sheds new light on the elite critiques advanced by populist movements and problematizes accounts of a straightforward rightward turn in the Red Wall. I conclude that the folk theories of elite power articulated by Brexit's most enthusiastic supporters indicate a desire for an at-least-somewhat egalitarian redistribution of elite power, albeit an exclusionary form localised within the national borders reaffirmed by the referendum result.

I am not, then, concerned with elites *per se* so much as the concepts that publics use to think about the elite and the broader role these concepts play in political thought. I draw on interviews with thirty-six politically active residents of the Red Wall region of England, chosen for its recent history of anti-elite agitation, and the elite concept's apparent role in persuading large swathes of this historically left-leaning region to support the notionally right-wing Brexit movement (Kanagasooriam & Simon 2021). Table 1 contains the research questions addressed by this thesis. Rather than prescribing the meaning of the elite concept, these research questions allowed participants to construct the elite concept for themselves, and explore whether and how their notions of the elite influence the opinions they hold, the practices they engage in, and the identities they enact.

**Table 1. Research questions**

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**RQ1** How do Red Wall residents conceptualise the elite?

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**RQ2** What are the implications for political thought?

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Participants were thus given maximal freedom to construct the elite concept as they see it. However, this freedom was not absolute. Their accounts were constrained by the elite concept's central presupposition—that no elite exists in isolation. All elites imply the existence of a larger population that also includes non-elites. This part/whole implication is

evident in the word's etymological origin<sup>7</sup>, and its everyday use. Talk of 'elite chess players' (for example) is only meaningful if some number of lesser chess players also exist. The social elites examined by this thesis thus imply the existence of a larger, social whole that also includes non-elites with relatively little access to economic, social and cultural capital (Savage 2015). The elite is thus a 'recursive concept' (Cunningham & Savage 2015:322) that is constantly, necessarily, in flux (Dorling 2013). As the project progressed, I came to think that the concept's political implications depend less on the identities we attribute to the elite, than the often-implicit part/whole relations that differentiate elite from non-elites in our mental maps of society. I thus examine elite construction as an act of folk mereology—Rose & Schaffer's (2017) term for non-expert reasoning about parts and wholes.

### 1.3 Folk mereology

The philosopher and psychologist William James (1909:50) wrote that, on any given topic, 'to believe in the one or in the many ... that is the classification with the maximum number of consequences.' For James, in all areas of human pursuit, differences of opinion could often be traced back to the often-unconscious decision we take to separate the endlessly complex world around us into a finite, and thus comprehensible, set of 'things.' His statement captures the core principle of mereology, the branch of philosophy that studies relations between wholes and their parts. The kind of work done by mereologists is probably best grasped via the questions they examine, such as:

[I]f a paper plate is positioned on a table between a plastic knife and a metal fork, does this scattered plurality of diverse objects make up a single composite object (a 'table setting') or not? Or if two people shake hands, does this connected plurality of similar objects make up a single composite object

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<sup>7</sup> The English word 'elite' comes from the Latin *electa* for 'the chosen part' (Zannoni 1978:7).

(shaped like a sculpture of two people shaking hands) or not? (Rose & Schaffer 2017:238).

Mereological judgements about material things like plates, knives and people help us make sense of the physical world, by helping us determine (for instance) whether the landscape up ahead is a forest or a set of trees (Moore 2015). These decisions are informed by observation but cannot be made on a purely empirical basis. They always involve subjective assessments of the sense data available to us, and the norms and conventions imbibed from culture. We might ordinarily regard rocks strewn across a hillside as a plural set of many objects. However, if they are given a collective name such as 'Stone Henge' and integrated into a folk tradition of sun worship, our mental categories shift to accommodate the rocks as component parts of a single culturally-constituted object.

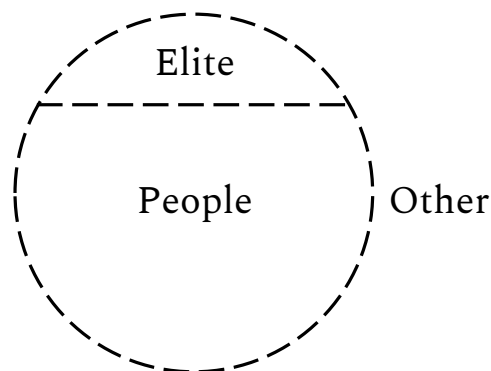
As mereological judgements shape our perception of the physical world, this thesis assumes that similar judgements also structure the social world—by distinguishing us from them, here from there, elite from non-elite, and so on. I use Rose & Schaffer's (2017) concept of 'folk mereology' to help discern the political implications of the elite concepts constructed by participants. While conventional mereology examines the nature of 'actual' parts and wholes (Goff 2008), folk mereology concerns the part/whole assessments made by ordinary people as they navigate the world around them. Early investigations have focused on physical objects like those in the table setting example quoted above. My analysis transposes folk mereology from metaphysics into politics. Practically speaking, this means I did not only examine participants' explicit statements about the elite, but also the often-implicit mereological judgements that situate the elite within their mental maps of social reality.

Badiou (2009:viii) argues that identifying a part (like 'the elite') within a larger whole ('society') is a three-step process captured by the phrase 'a being is thinkable only insofar as it belongs to a world.' First, we must identify the part itself. Second, we must specify its relations with



other parts within the whole. Third, we must identify the boundary that delimits the whole to which the parts belong. These operations are often uncontroversial when applied to physical objects. However they acquire ethical or political significance when applied to social objects. Rather than knives and forks that together constitute a table setting, identifying *the elite* and *the people* that together constitute *a society* entails several irreducibly political questions—who is the elite? Who is not? And where does society's boundary lie? These questions formed the basis of my analysis of the political implications of the elite concepts constructed by participants (RQ2).

**Figure 3. The elite concept**



In principle, there is no limit to the identities human beings can assign to the elite. Reasonable observers may differ over whether 'the elite' principally denotes holders of political, economic or cultural power and, indeed, whether these broad categories adequately describe the power relations that govern their lives (Massey 1995:56). The number of parts into which the non-elite sectors of society might be divided is similarly open-ended. For narrative coherence, my analysis focuses on two specific non-elite parts that I term 'the people' and 'the other.' These terms are drawn from Mouffe's (2005) relational theory of 'the political' which posits that all collective identities ('the people') are constituted by their opposition to various others (elite-others, immigrant-others, ally-others). Chapter 7 thus characterizes the elite concepts constructed by participants as variants on the ideal-typical elite concept depicted in Figure 3

as a part in a broader whole that also includes the people and the other. The people represents those part(s) of society left over once the elite has been accounted for. The other represents those considered external to the polity constituted by the elite and the people, who do not 'count' as political subjects to the same extent as those identified as internal to society's borders (Fraser 2010:281).

Because these mereological relations capture the whole of society in broad outline, the elite concept and its environs provide significant insight into participants' implicit 'mental maps' of political reality. In Figure 3, the dotted lines illustrate how the conceptual boundaries between elite, people and other can be configured in a practically infinite number of ways, that often carry political implications. For instance, 'the supranational socialist' discourse that sought to suppress national identity in the Soviet Union tended to construct a hard border between the popular masses and a capitalist elite (Salecl 1994:216) to promote interstitial antagonism between the two. Conversely, the border between the national people and the other was implied to be permeable, to facilitate solidarity with the working-class populations of other nations. However, nativist discourses tend to construct these partitions differently. For instance, by blurring divisions between elite and people within a national boundary, and/or sharpening the boundary between the nation and the immigrant-others external to it.

Chapter 7 thus conceives the elite concepts constructed by participants as a part within a broader whole that also contains the people and/or the other. By doing so, my mereological approach hopes to uncover the suppositions nested within the elite concept explicit, illuminating the implicit political judgements participants made as they shared their account of power and the powerful in contemporary Britain. Table 2 embeds this approach into the research questions pursued by this thesis.

**Table 2. Research questions (expanded)**

	Original	Mereological
<b>RQ1</b>	How do Red Wall residents conceptualise the elite?	a. How did participants construct the elite from words and images?
		b. Was the elite one or many?
<b>RQ2</b>	What are the implications for political thought?	a. How did participants partition the elite from the people and the other?
		b. How did these partitions influence participants’ political thought?

Folk mereology provides a conceptual bridge between the literatures that inspired this thesis, which sits at the intersection of elite theory and populism studies. Each field approaches the same part-whole relation from opposite vantages by splitting society into two camps enjoined by a vertical power imbalance. Elite theory takes the elite as their object of study, and populism studies the people. Although rarely explicitly invoked by either field, mereological thinking has permeated elite theory at least since the monism-pluralism debate of the mid-twentieth century (Higley 2010; Chapter 2.2). Populism studies also uses parts and wholes to conceptualise relations between elites and peoples, particularly within the discursive paradigm that originated with the work of Ernesto Laclau. He defines populism as any discourse where ‘the *plebs* sees itself as the *populus*, the part as the whole’ by Laclau (2005a:86). Schoor (2021:242) uses a folk mereological proposition to illustrate populism’s core logic: ‘if the people are one and the populist is part of that one, the populist has an unmediated knowledge of what the people want.’

Elite theory and populism studies do not interact with each other as often as one might expect given their shared vocabulary and subject matter. Exceptions, like Mangset *et al*’s (2019)

typology of political, economic, cultural and intermediate 'populist-elite critiques,' tend to operate at the level of content. This thesis uses folk mereology to bring the fields together at the level of form.

#### **1.4 Chapter overview**

This thesis consists of three main sections that follow this introductory chapter. I first review the theories of elite power developed by elite theory and populism studies. I then detail the semi-structured interviews and conceptual framework that inform my analysis. Three analysis chapters then interpret the elite concepts constructed by participants, and the implications for their broader worldviews. A short conclusion chapter summarizes my analysis and considers the implications for our understanding of the elite concept, its role in Brexit and the broader populist turn, and the continuing electoral strength of Brexit's successor movements (particularly Nigel Farage's Reform UK – formerly The Brexit Party) in Red Wall England.

Chapter 2 (The Elite Concept) examines the history of elite theory from Marx through Pareto, the monism/pluralism debate, poststructuralist deconstruction and attempted re-assembly by network theory. Chapter 3 (The Elite in Political Discourse) examines how the elite has been constructed as an object of political discourse. This chapter situates the thesis within Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) discursive paradigm, and establishes the vocabulary of my analysis (including 'empty signifier,' 'nodal point' and 'constitutive outside'). Much of this work examines the anti-elite aspects of populist discourses, but I also explore elitist and 'anti-populist' movements that frame power and the powerful as virtuous upholders of the *status quo*.

Chapter 4 (Methodology) explains how I addressed the research questions stated above. I detail the recruitment of thirty-six politically active Red Wall residents, the interviews I conducted with them, and the analytical framework I applied to the data. The latter was a bespoke version of Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) poststructuralist discourse theory that integrated the concepts of folk mereology (Rose & Schaffer 2017) and order relation (Badiou 2014) to conceptualise the discursive formations participants constructed to represent the elite. Chapters 5 (Left-wing accounts) and 6 (Conservative and liberal accounts) describe how participants conceptualised the elite (RQ1). Left-wing participants consistently conceive the elite as a cohesive 'establishment' of aristocrats and oligarchs concentrated at the apex of British society. Conservatives and liberals favoured a pluralist account of the elite as a loosely-connected network of autonomous, high-achieving individuals dispersed across myriad social domains.

Chapter 7 (Political Implications) assesses the political consequences of the elite concepts constructed by participants (RQ2) across the vertical (populist-elitist) and horizontal (left-right) dimensions of political thought. I suggest that the elite concept's political implications were contingent on its content, its form, and the part/whole relations participants constructed between the elite, the people and the other. I develop two main arguments. First, that populist sentiment was strongest among participants who conceived the elite as one and many simultaneously, particularly as participants shared their recollections of the 2016 Brexit referendum. Drawing on Laclau (2005a), I argue that this dual perspective allowed the elite to function as both a nodal point and an empty signifier in populist discourse.

This finding suggests that populist elites depend on the same 'choreography ... between part and whole' as populist peoples (Stavrakakis 2020:10). Rather than a *plebs* that assumes the form of a *populus*, the hated elite appeared as a pluralist democracy that conceals a monist authoritarianism that must be resisted. Second, drawing on Badiou (2014), I argue that monist accounts of the elite shared an elective affinity with egalitarian politics quite irrespective of

participants' political orientation. Building on Zannoni's (1978) analysis of elite semiotics and 'the problem of distribution,' I contend that monism introduces a conceptual order to political discourse that facilitates the part/whole analysis Bobbio (1994) considered a prerequisite of distributive justice.

Finally, Chapter 8 (Conclusion) explores implications and limitations of these findings for populism and its opposites in twenty-first century Britain, and potential avenues for future work. Brexit support was strongest among those who took a dual perspective of British politics that combined elements of left-wing and conservative discourse, peaking among 'One Nation' conservatives who constructed an at-least-somewhat monist elite. I conclude that Brexit's uneven cross-party appeal may derive partly from resonances between the populist worldview and the distinct mental maps of society implied by left- and right-wing conceptions of 'the elite' in the contemporary UK.

## Chapter 2. The elite concept

### 2.1 Introduction

This thesis examines how the elite is conceptualised in Red Wall England (RQ1) and the consequences for political thought (RQ2). These research questions were formulated to address gaps in the academic literature on populism, which has tended to focus on participants' sentiments towards the elite rather than the discursive practices that imbue the elite concept with meaning. This chapter informs the analysis detailed in Chapters 5-7 by examining the various ways academics have conceptualised 'the elite' since the first modern studies of elite power were conducted in the nineteenth century. In the years since, elite theory's trajectory tells a mereological story, as the field developed ever more sophisticated and granular ways of discerning elite wholes from parts, culminating in the networked assemblage theories of the present day (Law 2002, DeLanda 2006, Muller 2015). Along the way I explore the 'Keyser Sütze elite' phenomenon, Du Gay's (2008) term for the elite concept's apparent obfuscation by poststructuralism and financial globalisation. These forces are said to have scrambled the connection between the meanings and referents associated with the elite concept, allowing actual elites to evade public scrutiny in an era of stark-and-increasing inequality.

The chapter consists of three main sections. First, I trace the history of the elite concept from its etymological origins to the present day. Second, I construct an abridged history of each major school of elite theory. These include Marxist, Machiavellian, Gramscian, monist, pluralist, poststructuralist and network theory approaches to scholarship on power and the powerful. Third, I explore the political associations of each school throughout their history, and consider whether some elite theories predispose their advocates to particular political ideologies (and vice versa). I pay particular interest to how these paradigms have conceptualised the British establishment, whose conquests, prosperity and cultural

penetration place it among the most theorised—and mythologised—social formations in world history<sup>8</sup>. Finally, I consider how the elite theory concepts of monism and pluralism might help make sense of the anti-elite aspects of Brexit, particularly as they manifested in the Red Wall towns where the empirical fieldwork detailed in Chapters 5-7 took place. Taken together, this literature suggest that the elite is a constructed, relational, irreducibly political concept whose full implications remain under-examined. This is, I contend, partly because of a tension between theory and politics' respective drives toward nuance and clarity.

## 2.2 The elite: a conceptual history

Elite theory's prehistory includes works by Aristotle, Polybius, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Tocqueville and JS Mill—but Marx is typically identified as the first elite theorist in the contemporary sense of the term (Higley 2010). This section examines each major elite theory paradigm in roughly chronological order from Marx to the present day, and so constructs a brief history of the sociological study of elites. Table 3 lists the fundamental components of each paradigm. These are the *distinction* they draw between elites and non-elites<sup>9</sup>, the ultimate source of elite *power*, and the *domain(s)* where that power is exercised (Zannoni 1978:18).

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<sup>8</sup> 'The ancient bourgeois society of England is surely the most thoroughly conditioned by ... the sedimented layers of culture deposited during the long good fortune of English capitalism.' (Nairn 1964:19).

<sup>9</sup> That Zannoni considered 'distinction between elite and non-elite' so fundamental a part of the elite concept demonstrates that the elite's meaning is contingent on its part/whole relations (see Chapter 1.3).



**Table 3. Abridged history of elite theory<sup>10</sup>**

	<b>School</b>	<b>Distinction</b>	<b>Power</b>	<b>Domain</b>
<b>1850s</b>	<b>Marxist</b>	Economic capital)	Material	Economy
<b>1890s-1930s</b>	<b>Machiavellian</b>	Institutional	Coercion	Politics
	<b>Gramscian</b>	Organic	Hegemony	Culture
<b>1950/60s</b>	<b>Monist</b>	Status	Monopoly	Any/all
	<b>Pluralist</b>	Dispersed inequality	Competition	Various
<b>1970s-present</b>	<b>Poststructuralist</b>	Symbolic capital	Doxa	Discourse
	<b>Network</b>	Mediation	Financialisation	Global

Marx’s lasting contribution to elite theory was his conception of the capitalist ‘ruling class’ as a unified stratum whose behaviours are driven by shared material interests. However, the first to call themselves ‘elite theorists’ by name were the Machiavellian school led by three Italian theorists: Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels (Aron 1968). In the field’s early years, theoretical disagreements mainly concerned which sector of society constituted the foundation of elite power. Marx (1848) argued that society’s economic ‘base’ was the ultimate determinant of power. The Machiavellians—led by the Italian trio of Mosca, Pareto and Michels—countered that power primarily resided with political elites with formal control over legal-rational institutions. That is, political and judicial office.

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from Zannoni (1978:19).

Mosca described how small groups are frequently able to politically out-manoeuvre large masses within representative democracies. His work focused on what he termed 'political classes' who exercise 'material, intellectual, or even moral superiority' over the governed (Mosca 1939:111). Pareto (1935) wrote extensively on what we would now term meritocracy. He suggested that, while a just society would produce worthy elites, actually-existing societies cannot help but confer elite status on those with pre-existing advantages. Michels' main contribution to Elite Theory was his 'Iron Law of Oligarchies', which holds that all systems which promote a select group to elite status (including representative democracy) will tend to produce 'oligarchies' with disproportionate control over resources and information (1911).

Soon after, Antonio Gramsci (1929) stressed the autonomy of a third kind of power embodied by culture and therefore wielded by those with influence over the various hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses operative in a society. In Gramsci's time this largely referred to writers, political leaders, and 'organic' intellectuals. On this telling, governing classes did not win consent from the masses through political and economic coercion alone, but also on the terrain of discourse and ideas; including the habitual, sometimes unspoken codes which make up the prevailing 'common sense' within a society (Eagleton 1991). Gramsci saw the full range of institutions intermediate between state and economy—'civil society'—as the main site of hegemonic contestation.

The notion of a single, transhistorical source of power—whether economic, political or cultural—fell from academic favour in the mid-twentieth century. Scholars had begun to problematise the 'economism' of prior Marxist theory, and the constructivist turn had persuaded most of the academic world that social fields like 'politics' and 'culture' were themselves discursive constructions that could not serve as a perennial 'foundation' for any theory of power. Weber's (1947:152) influential work 'actors within social relationships [able] to carry out their own will despite resistance' allowed elites to operate in any social realm, unmoored from the economic and political anchorage points established by Marx and the

Machiavellians. The new era of 'post-foundational' elite theory (Marchart 2007) was, then, less interested in the *content* than the *form* of elite identities (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000). Post-foundational elite theory's first task was to work out whether their object of study constituted one or many things, and the field thus split into 'monist' and 'pluralist' schools of thought.

Elite monism emphasised the collective aspects of elite groups. Mills' (1956) *The Power Elite* alleged that liberal democracies were ruled by unified establishments of political, intellectual, business, and military elites who together held a monopoly over any-and-all sources of power. Monism acknowledged that different types of power existed but felt that liberal democracies were inherently hierarchical, such that a small cluster of power centres would always tend to dominate. A monist account of the British elite could thus observe that 'the political elite shares its position at the apex of power with a number of other elite groups, all of which together are the ruling class, but it is still supreme among these other elites' (Guttsman 1964). For Mills, elite unity arose in most liberal democracies from shared 'cultural modes of integration' and 'revolving doors' between elite domains in government, business and the military, which together constituted a monolithic 'military-industrial complex.'

Elite pluralism, on the other hand, emphasised the patterned actions of individual elite agents dispersed across many social domains. Dahl (1961:228) identified six characteristics of the 'dispersed inequality' said to underlie elite plurality. These were (i) different kinds of power are available to different citizens, (ii) with few exceptions, these powers are unequally distributed, (iii) individuals best off with respect to one power are often worst off with respect to many others, (iv) no power dominates the others, (v) most resources are ineffective in many contexts, and (vi) virtually no one is entirely lacking in power. Monopolization of power by any single group was thus impossible, and Western nations were the site of 'competitive oligarchy' between distinct elite groups able to act as 'checks and balances' on each other (Schumpeter 1942). Elite typologies distinguished the 'makers' and 'takers' of 'big decisions' among state, economic, church, military, educational and mass media elites (Giddens 1972:345).

Monism and pluralism drew very different conclusions from their observations of the same power structures. However, none of the scholars involved in what came to be called the monism-pluralism debate held absolutist views about elite mereology (Higley 2010). Although Mills felt that 'since the war, neither business nor government can be understood as separate realms of power' he also criticised 'true radicals' for whom 'the corporations and the state [...] have become one big structure' (1957:150). These nuances were often lost as pluralism was gradually declared the 'winner' of the epochal debate with monism. 'From the economic advances of Japan and the Asian tigers to state socialism in Eastern Europe, and the elite-driven Soviet collapse' (Higley & Pakulski 2000:330), most mainstream elite theorists of the time viewed inter-elite competition as a more persuasive explanation of twentieth century history than the class struggle posited by Mills (1956).

As with many academic debates, the notion of a 'victory' for one 'side' is too binary to capture the nuances of the debate between elite theory's monist and pluralist camps. The notion of dispersed power across multiple domains was an important step forward from the arborescent theories of Marx and the Machiavellians, but the pluralists tended to unduly privilege the observable components of elite scholarship over the theoretical. Shapiro characterised elite pluralism's empirical bias as:

A failure to consider forms of power that might be exercised via manipulation of agendas, formation of preferences, and the constitution of identities – all of which might be expressions of latent conflict and structural power relations that are not themselves directly observable (Shapiro 2005:30).

Shapiro contrasted pluralist empiricism against the ontological or 'logacist' biases of the monist school, which favoured the 'latent ... structural power relations' note. Monist and pluralist accounts of elite power were thus speaking past each other. The former concerned

with the unobservable, abstract nature of power and the latter their empirical observations of actually-existing elites.

Elite theory's binary split recalled similar disagreements emergent during the formative years of other academic fields. Mereology, the branch of metaphysics that studies relations between parts and wholes (see Chapter 1.3), had been through its own monism-pluralism dispute several decades earlier (Goff 2008). Rather than elites, the mereologists were concerned with whether being itself was best understood as one or many objects. The dispute was eventually clarified following the formal distinction of empirics from ontology. Mereological questions were thus split into two categories concerning the 'existence' and relative 'priority' of parts and wholes:

Existence monism ... holds that exactly one concrete object exists. [...] To distinguish herself from the existence monist, the priority monist will allow that the world has proper parts, but hold that the whole is basic and the proper parts are derivative. [...] This doctrine *presupposes* that the many proper parts exist, for the whole to be prior to. (Schaffer 2007).

Before this distinction was introduced, metaphysical monism—understood as the claim that the cosmos constitutes a single concrete object—was often dismissed out of hand (e.g. Muirhead 1935:243). However, once existence had been distinguished from priority, it could be clearly separated from Schaffer's priority monism, which held that 'the whole is basic and the parts are derivative.'

Following Shapiro, I contend that elite theory has at times laboured under a similar confusion. As in metaphysics, conflation of existence and priority elite meant the monist position was unduly dismissed, as most agreed that the *existence* of a single elite group was a conspiratorial fantasy (cf. Mills 1957). Its real value always lay in the *priority* claim that elite classes often possess emergent properties of scale and relation that cannot be localised to their individual

parts (Mills 1960). Monist claims always implied an ontological primacy of elite wholes over their obviously extant parts, rather than a denial that multiple elite groups could be said to exist. Pluralism's 'victory' may, then, have been less definitive than is sometimes implied (e.g. Higley & Pakulski 2000:330).

After the foundational and post-foundational eras, the late twentieth century saw a third epoch of elite theory. The empirical turn heralded by pluralist elite theory's 'victory' over monism met resistance from structuralist and poststructuralist theories of power (Savage & Williams 2008), which 'deconstructed' the very notion of discrete human agents capable of wielding power over others. Poststructuralism, a multifarious academic movement that sought to 'deconstruct' prior certainties about social reality (Wylie 2015), did much to enliven the study of elites even as they made the concept harder to grasp (Du Gay 2008). Foucault (1975) challenged top-down notions of power by stressing micro-scale power relations inherent to all interpersonal interaction. Bourdieu's work on 'cultural' power described the capacity of elites to emerge in any sphere of human endeavour (or 'social field') via the accumulation of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic 'capital.'

This represented a break from earlier elite theories that posited a specific domain in which the elite operated. For Bourdieu, social domains such as 'the state' or 'the economy' did not exist independently of our perceptions, but emerged from the socially constructed meanings, rules, and practices that make up social life. Bourdieu thus offered a 'micro level' extension of Gramscian hegemony theory (Eagleton 1991) that sought to identify how power operated through everyday interactions and shared habitual codes of behaviour, which he called 'Doxa'. Bourdieu radically expanded the domains studied by elite theorists. His work described the capacity of elites to emerge in any sphere of human endeavour via the accumulation of 'capital' meaningful to the occupants of a given 'field'. His was a more elastic view of elite formation than that suggested by the static categories present in much nominal elite theory of the era (Savage & Williams 2008).

The post/structuralist intervention produced more elastic notions of the elite, and greater sensitivity to the accrual of power across a wider range of social fields. Elite theorists were no longer confined to static domains like 'the state,' 'politics,' or even 'society.' These developments produced a split between what Scott (2008:29) termed 'the mainstream of power research' focused on the 'decision makers' atop formally powerful institutions, and a second 'Foucauldian' stream that sought to understand how power subjectifies people into subaltern subject positions, wherein they act according to the wishes of 'decision makers' without coercion. This second stream of elite theory was free to pursue its object of study in any social field – or even to reject the very idea of 'the social' altogether (Latour 2005). Deconstruction of the elite concept even prompted scattered mentions of (e.g.) working class elites (Drescher 2009) that might have been considered oxymoronic in previous eras. Deconstructive works by Foucault, Bourdieu, and a cadre of actor network theorists (Latour 1988, Law 1986) elevated the importance of *relations* to the study of elite power. New forms of elite network analysis formalised the poststructuralist tenet that power does not simply reside 'within' elite agents but emerges from the networks of social relations in which they are embedded (Scott 1992, 1997).

Just as the elite concept was becoming more prominent in public discourse in the closing decades of the twentieth century (see Chapter 1.2) elite theory faded from academic prominence. The field had been caught in a 'pincer movement' between insurgent neo-positivist and post-structuralist tendencies in the social sciences (Savage & Williams 2008). The former promoted large scale survey methods, while the latter foregrounded interpretive accounts of unseen social forces. Elite theory, with its small N groups of causative agents, faded from view. For Savage & Williams (2008) post/structuralist deconstruction brought many valuable insights but had also pushed elite theory away from 'material reality' and towards language and culture, such that 'little attention [had been] paid to the new and expanded group of financial elites' who had quietly wrested sovereignty from states around the world as the third millennium approached.

However, engagements with 'the moment of finance-capital' by Jameson (1991:143) and Deleuze (1992) among others suggest financialisation was not so 'absent' from post/structuralist theories of power as some allege (Savage & Williams 2008:9). Indeed, as the final decade of the twentieth century began, Deleuze's assessment of power was not far removed from classic pluralist notions of 'dispersed inequality' (Dahl 1961):

This is no longer a capitalism for production but for the product, which is to say, for being sold or marketed. Thus it is essentially dispersive, and the factory has given way to the corporation. The family, the school, the army, the factory are no longer the distinct analogical spaces that converge towards an owner—state or private power—but coded figures—deformable and transformable—of a single corporation that now has only stockholders (Deleuze 1992:6).

Deleuze's references to 'deformable and transformable' power suggested that elites were no longer understood as the leaders of autonomous social fields. Financialised power no longer resembled a set of one-or-many objects, but a more-or-less viscous liquid able to seep into any cavity enjoined to the global capitalist economy (Chatelet 1998). Power in the twenty-first century was thus less about places than flows (Castells 1996). Digital networks now allowed capital to traverse the globe with scarcely any input from the human decision makers typically examined by elite theory (Scott 2008).

Elite theory underwent a significant revival in the early years of the new millennium (Savage & Williams 2008, Daloz 2010, Khan 2012, Salverda & Abbink 2013, Schijf 2013, Birtchnell & Caletrío 2014, Howard & Kenway 2015). Although prompted by the historically high levels of wealth inequality evident across much of the globe (Piketty 2013), much of this work notes that elitism is not maintained by wealth alone but also the discursive normalisation of power relations. Scholars have thus begun to examine how elitism is conceptualised by researchers,



publics, and by nominal elites themselves. Thurlow & Jaworski's (2017) review of the relevant literature suggests that contemporary elites tend to be conceptualised in three ways.

First, as a socioeconomic class identity performed and enculturated by those with disproportionate concentrations of material resources. Second, as a sociological category inferable from quantitative measures of economic and social capital. Third, as a set of contingent and constructed systems of meaning that sustain the hegemonic power of a privileged few. This thesis recognises the role of each of these factors in sustaining actually-existing elitism. However, my research questions focus on the third conception of elitism as a discursive formation<sup>11</sup>. Long before social science's 'constructivist turn,' elite theory recognised that elite status could only persist when it was both 'imitable and thought worth imitating by others' (Nadel 1956:426). That is, not just material wealth or high office but also 'the things that go along with it.'

Even the most empirical of elite theorists, then, have long been aware of the inherently discursive aspects of their object of study, and the role of mass publics in determining who and what counts as elite at any given juncture<sup>12</sup>. However, some contend that the subjective aspects of the elite concept renders it unsuitable for social scientific analysis. For instance, Moyser & Wagstaffe argue that:

Elite theory suffers from confusion over key terms, a relative dearth of testable hypotheses, a failure clearly to separate normative from empirical theory and, not least, the lack of a firm data base in which the latter could be solidly grounded (Moyser & Wagstaffe 1987:1).

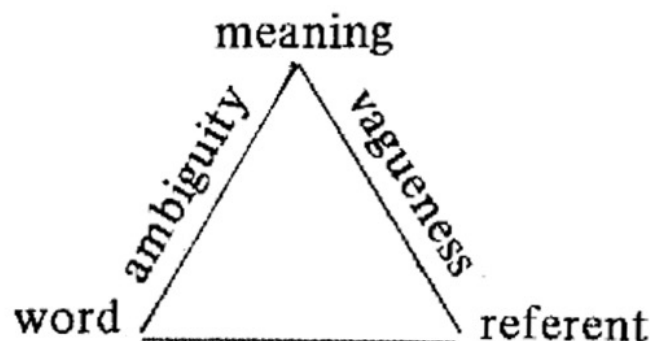
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<sup>11</sup> That said, the identitarian and socioeconomic approaches are themselves discourses that constitute and contest elitism's symbolic force.

<sup>12</sup> '[T]he patterned actions of elites ... take place within, and are somewhat limited by, parameters set by mass populations [such that] the relation between elites and mass publics is interdependent' (Higley & Pakulski 2000:330).

Positivist critiques of this sort miss that the elite is a fundamentally relational, value-laden, and therefore *political* concept. Facts cannot be entirely isolated from values in elite theory, because defining any elite always involves an inherently political act of discursive construction with implications for who is recognised as powerful (and who is not). Rather than abandon the concept, Zannoni (1978:2) argued that scholars should strive to construct their elite concepts as thoughtfully and transparently as possible. Drawing on Barthesian semiotics, he distinguished the *word* elite from the *meanings* and referents associated with it. On this basis, he identified two confusions that afflicted the elite concept: ambiguity and vagueness (Figure 4). Respectively, these refer to the elite's capacity to connote many meanings, and of those meanings to connote many referents.

**Figure 4. Sources of confusion in the elite concept<sup>13</sup>**



Relations between words and their meanings are always in flux. However, they are particularly unstable with respect to the elite concept, which presupposes a part/whole relation with a larger society external to itself. This means that it cannot have a stable meaning, nor a persistent one-to-one correspondence to a particular section of society (De Cleen 2019). The picture is further complicated by the academic prominence of several other words and phrases associated with the same meanings and referents as the elite. These include ruling or political classes, aristocracy, and oligarchy, each of which embodied some or all of the characteristics

<sup>13</sup> Reproduced from (Zannoni 1978:4).

listed in Table 4: fewness, distinction, cohesion, awareness of elite status, and power. Zannoni argued that the elite differed from these other terms because of its conceptual breadth, as it connoted any privileged group that was 'few' in number and 'distinct' relative to a non-elite majority. The others all combined fewness and distinction with several other characteristics. Ruling classes were cohesive, aware of their elite status and held a general monopoly over power. Political classes were similar, but their power was specifically legal-rational. Tendencies toward internal, factional disputes meant that aristocracies and oligarchies combined each characteristic except for cohesion.

**Table 4. Elite synonyms** (Zannoni 1978:11)

	<b>Elite</b>	<b>Ruling class</b>	<b>Pol. class</b>	<b>Aristocracy</b>	<b>Oligarchy</b>
<b>Few</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Distinct</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Cohesive</b>		✓	✓		
<b>Self-aware</b>		✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Powerful<sup>14</sup></b>		✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓

These near-synonyms thus carry more precise connotations than the elite, whose 'open texture' does not, in Zannoni's estimation, connote a 'specific meaning.' Some see this lack of specificity as a problem, and positivist elite theorists have often argued that the field should at least attempt to reach a broad consensus about the elite concept's meaning. For instance, Nadel (1956) argued an elite group had to be highly exclusive, aware of their elite status, exhibit some degree of corporate organisation, and a collective interest in the maintenance of their elite status. Zannoni's 'open' definition excised all these characteristics, retaining only

<sup>14</sup> One tick indicates 'political power.' Two ticks indicate 'power in general' (Zannoni 1978:11).

‘fewness’ and ‘distinction.’ As this conception grew more prevalent in academic and public discourses the set of referents connoted by the elite concept expanded radically.

The influence of political and economic elites over mass populations remained a central concern, but the field took renewed interest in the subtle interpersonal forms of power wielded in public (media, academia, and civil society) and private domains (workplaces, nuclear families, and the social networks of which they formed a part) (Bourdieu 1984, Foucault 1975, Skeggs 1997). As academic discourse about elites grew more heterogeneous, the elite’s displacement of relatively specific terms like ‘aristocracy’ and ‘bourgeoisie’ documented since the 1950s (Figure 2) suggests public discourse had also adopted a broader, less specific understanding of power and the powerful. To encompass these new ways of thinking about power relations, the elite concept was partially decoupled from conventional economic and legal-rational notions of power.

This constructivist turn sat uncomfortably with positivist scholars who lamented that the elite concept had ‘come to mean any minority group with power over a majority’ (Aron 1968). Some attempted to correct the apparent slide away from objectivity by anchoring the elite concept to a narrow set of referents. For the concept to retain its value to sociological research, Scott (2008:28) argued that ‘its meanings must be narrowed down, and their relations with other groups with which they are often confused in real-world situations clarified.’ However, Zannoni’s analysis suggests that confusions about elites are often semiotic rather than sociological, and thus unlikely to be solved by a typology of non-elite groups.

Like all concepts that imply the existence of a larger of which it forms a part, the elite is always likely to float between distinct meanings (Laclau 2001) as different people make different mereological judgements of where the elite’s boundary lies. The elite is not, then, an ‘objective’ sociological category, but an inherently relational concept that must be discursively constructed whether our intentions are descriptive, theoretical or rhetorical. This may be sub-

optimal for the study of elites. However, in a discursive analysis, the functionally infinite implications of the elite concept's 'open texture' constitute a highly interesting object of research.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Piketty's (2013) *Capital* sparked specific interest in financial power (Savage 2015). As the neoliberal era saw labour and capital markets detach from the territorial boundaries of nation states (Vibert 2008), a novel class of 'intermediate elites' brought previously discrete sections of the world economy closer together (Folkman et al 2007, Gilbert & Williams 2022). Network theory attempted to 'reconstruct' elite theory for the new epoch (Castells 1996). Although monism and pluralism remain important schemas for conceptualising concentrations of elite power, the relational insights of poststructuralism did away with the false binary choice between them. The field was thus better able to grasp the 'meta-networks' of twenty-first century power:

The global meta-network of finance and media is itself dependent on other major networks, such as the political network, the cultural production network, the military/security network, the criminal network and the decisive global network of production, science, technology and knowledge management. These networks do not merge. Instead, they engage in partnership and competition by forming ad hoc networks around specific projects. But they all share a common interest: to control the rules and norms of society through a political system that primarily responds to their interests and values. (Castells 2012:7).

Network theory is part of an all-hands-on-deck response to the rise of finance capital, which increasingly saw discursive and materialist approaches to elitism applied side-by-side. Works by Bourdieu and Piketty have thus been combined to re-frame elitism as a multi-dimensional aggregate of economic, cultural and social capital (Savage *et al* 2013:233-234).

This work shows what can be achieved when the different schools of elite theory are combined. However, their synthesis may be too little too late. Davies (2017) argues that elite theory's Weberian problematic was rendered obsolete in recent decades, as nameable human elites ceded much of their power to algorithmic finance capital. The market split power into a radically pluralised patchwork too granular for human beings to control, as conventional decision makers were replaced by what Davies (2017:241) terms 'cyborg intermediaries.' That is, 'the digital elites which operate within the system of codes, data, screens and prices' that sustain twenty-first century capitalism. These spectres of value amplified and accelerated the phenomenon of capital flight – 'the hasty moving on' of money 'to greener pastures, higher rates of investment return, and cheaper labour' that subordinates the desires of democratically elected legislatures to the whims of private finance (Jameson 1991:142).

For Davies (2017:227), elites 'in the classical Millsian sense of those taking tacitly coordinated big decisions,' are then no longer central to understanding how power operates. Rather than the interplay between elites and masses (Higley & Pakulski 2000), history is now driven by the 'non-human agencies' (Latour 1992) birthed by the 'power-saturated circuits of contemporary capitalism' (Savage & Williams 2008:9). Academia and politics have been slow to catch up to this new reality. Although the 2008 financial crash produced a wave of anti-elite sentiment, the aggrieved parties struggled to identify the Weberian 'big decision makers' who could be held definitively responsible. The powers that produced the crash better resembled a patchwork of micro-decisions by marketized non/human agents. The consequent depoliticising of human affairs was an intended consequence of the neoliberal era, that Davies describes as 'an effort to elevate unconscious processes over 'conscious' ones, [and] cybernetic, non-human systems and processes over discursive spheres of politics and judgement' (Davies 2017:230). The only role for left humans is that of the diplomat elite 'who comes to narrate and justify what the markets are "saying."' Elite theory's utility would be constrained until the field underwent 'a reset ... around the current capitalist conjuncture of financialization' (Davis & Williams 2017:3).

That said, not everyone agrees that the rise of the financial cyborgs has so radically altered the terms of elite power. The years since the 2008 crash have been extremely profitable for the top percentiles of the human population (Hecht et al 2020) despite the apparent curtailment of their power. Moreover, Durand (2022:39) argues that the hegemony of finance persistent since the 1971 liberalization of exchange rates has been subtly 'demoted' as successive crises have made the semi-robotic elites of finance ever more dependent on the favour of political elites within state-controlled central banks. While their encoding within digital networks has surely intensified the power and reach of capitalist abstracta, Marxist elite theory has long considered capital a 'globalised regime ... ruled by abstractions rather than human beings' (Read 2008:151). Distinctions between 'humanist' and 'instrumentalist' conceptions of power are not novel to the twenty-first century (Savage & Williams 2008:8), and finance capital's tendency to disperse power has been noted for over a century (e.g. Hilferding 1910).

Financialisation may not, then, represent so qualitative a change to capitalist power relations as Davies maintains (2017). Nor does it necessarily constitute a pluralisation of power. For Sampson (2004:360), finance capital was not a plurality of market actors so much as a monist blob whose expansion had drawn previously autonomous state, media and civil society institutions into its orbit. In Schaffer's (2007) terms, Sampson gave ontological priority to the whole of finance capital over the legions of human and robot actors that constituted its parts. The merits of this judgement notwithstanding, Sampson's view attests to the role of mereological judgements in our assessments of the elite.

In sum, elite theory has evolved considerably since its economistic Marxist origins. The Machiavellians shifted focus to institutional power while Gramsci emphasized the cultural processes that fortify the hegemonic powers of dominant classes. The mid-twentieth century then saw a split between monist theories of elite unity and pluralist accounts of dispersed power. This binary division was deconstructed by the poststructuralist turn that expanded and deepened the scope of elite theory, although sometimes in terms that obscured the elite

concept in the public imagination. More recently, network theorists have reconciled monist and pluralist perspectives to grasp the profound granularity of power in the age of global, digital finance. While some argue that the emergence of cybernetic decision makers requires a full reset of elite research, others maintain that a thoughtful synthesis of material and discursive approaches to elitism remain vital for our understanding of contemporary power structures.

### **2.3 Elite theory and politics**

This thesis examines the political implications of the lay elite theories held by thirty-six residents of the Red Wall region of England. To inform my analysis, this section examines the political profile of each major paradigm of elite theory. I focus on two dimensions of political thought (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017). The horizontal dimension denotes alignment with the left- and right-wings of politics (Bobbio 1994). The vertical denotes whether each school tends to 'study up' or 'down' (Nader 1973). That is, the degree to which they conceive power from an elitist or anti-elitist perspective. I will argue that monist theories of elite power are more conducive to 'studying up,' for the simple fact that the decentralisation implied by elite pluralism requires that we study in many directions at once. The section concludes with reflections on elite theory in the British context, and the implications for the anti-elite aspects of Brexit.

#### *Left, right, up, down*

From Hobbes through Marx and Gramsci to Mills, elite monism has often been associated with the political left. Marxism was the main intellectual culture of left-wing thought around the world from the 1880s to the present day (Therborn 2008:94). Marx's writings were explicitly anti-elitist and thus provided an upward-facing theoretical framework for many anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-patriarchal movements (Oktaykan 2014) alongside several



technocratic/authoritarian regimes (Pye 1990). Marxism remained a core component of monist elite theory well into the twentieth century such that 'mainstream social science [considered] Millsian elite theory and Marxism ... similar enough to be treated as one and the same' (Mizruchi 1983:645). Shapiro (2005:30) described Mills' (1956) *The Power Elite* as 'a post-Marxian reformulation of the old Hobbesian argument that power always resides in one place.' Monism's appeal, Shapiro alleged, therefore 'relied less on evidence than [...] ideological attractiveness' to left-inclined academics.

The Machiavellian school of Pareto, Mosca and Michels was explicitly anti-Marxist and thus associated with the political right. Several of its progenitors were openly associated with fascism (Barkley 1955, Zanotti-Karp 1970) and plural elite theory was officially suppressed in some state socialist countries. These associations meant pluralist scholars working in the Soviet bloc sometimes undertook 'elite theory by stealth' under euphemistic labels such as 'developed class analysis' and 'political-ideological leadership' (Higley & Pakulski 2012:327-328). The Machiavellians were in no sense anti-elitist, but rather hoped to help impulsive masses select the optimal elite class to rule over them (Higley 2010).

From the mid-twentieth century, elite theorists of all stripes heeded Nader's (1973) call to 'study up.' Post-Nader elite theory thus sought to constrain, rather than merely describe (or facilitate) the power relations examined by the social sciences. Mills' followers tended to answer the call with enthusiasm<sup>15</sup>. However, 'studying up' was not universally adopted. Some elite theorists continued to 'study down' as in Sartori's (1976:41) pluralist work on that sought to understand anti-system movements that 'reject the values of the political order within which [they] operate' to minimise disruption to the smooth functioning of liberal democracy. He explicitly characterised anti-elitism as a 'misguided dialectic' between utopian notions of democracy and their imperfect implementation in the real world.

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<sup>15</sup> Drawing on Mills' (1956:163-164) open contempt for those members of the elite who 'possess the means of realizing in big ways one's little whims and fantasies and sicknesses.'

These political alignments do not necessarily reflect the biases of the advocates of the monist and pluralist schools. Zannoni argues that the latent spatial logics of monism and pluralism disposed each school to distinct perspectives on 'the problem of distribution.' That is, the fundamentally political matter of how power *should* be allocated in society:

[T]he consequences of considering the elite singular or plural are not minor. Beyond the grammatical distinction there is a deeper ... logical distinction between general and singular terms. ... A singular elite implies that the problem of distribution of power in society can be analysed in terms of elite and non-elite without further specification. To consider elite a [plural] term, on the contrary, implies that the distribution of power cannot be approached simply by distinguishing between elite and non-elite. In this case, we need to be much more sophisticated and analyse the distribution in terms of different conflicting elites. (Zannoni 1978:17-18).

Like Shapiro, Zannoni thus identified an egalitarian streak to elite monism. Pluralism was said to be less suited to antagonistic, anti-elite politics, because their theory of dispersed inequality 'breaks the absolute distinction between elite and non-elite' (Zannoni 1978:17). When power is not concentrated at a single elevated point, it becomes difficult to 'punch up' at the elite because the observer is less able to determine which way is up, down or sideways. The mereological form of the elite concept may, then, be as politically consequential as whether we consider the elite an establishment, oligarchy or aristocracy.

Zannoni effectively argued that monism and pluralism constituted 'parallax views' of the elite. In astronomy, parallax occurs when onlookers at two or more widely separated points in space afford valid-yet-irreconcilable observations of the same phenomenon. Žižek (2006) adapts the concept of parallax to social phenomena and likens the perspectives of distinct social groups

to 'anamorphic' projections of the same movie at different aspect ratios. Contra positivist assumptions that monism and pluralism represent differences of opinion about a shared empirical reality (Mangset et al 2019), when the two perspectives are conceived as twin components of a parallax view any hope of an 'objective' solution to the problem of distribution disappears. Observers with distinct mereological perspectives on power are thus liable to reach distinct conclusions about how it should be distributed. Determining which should be adopted as policy is then primarily a political—rather than empirico-theoretical—problem.

Shapiro's (2005:30) critique of pluralism's over-reliance on empirics over theory appeared validated in the second half of the twentieth century, as the pluralist 'victory' over monism coincided with a positivist turn in the sociology of elites. As the neoliberal era unfolded through the 1980s the anti-elitism of the Mills era was replaced by a consensus quite at ease with the supposedly benign elites atop Western governments and industries, and optimistic about liberal democracy's capacity to constrain their worst excesses. The field was arguably drawing closer to the liberal elite theory of Toqueville (1840) and JS Mill (1859), if not the marketized theories of the Mont Pelerin society (e.g. Hayek 1988). The socialist and fascist tendencies that had animated elite theory earlier in the century receded from the mainstream, as did the interpretivism practiced by Mills and his followers. Elite research through the 1990s has thus been critiqued for an apolitical and 'atheoretical' approach that 'explored [elites] in an historical and comparative void ... mainly concerned with measuring trivial correlates of elite status' (Higley 2012:326). In this era, elite theory did not study up or down so much as *across* a supposedly level playing field.

Savage & Williams (2008) attributed elite theory's depoliticisation to two factors: the deconstruction of the elite concept by poststructuralist academics, and the incomprehensibly complex power relations wrought by financialised globalization. Du Gay (2008:80-81) concurred that the combined effects of social science's discursive turn and 'the new political

mythology of the market' had produced what he termed the 'Keyser Sütze elite' phenomenon. Constructivist academics and neoliberal politicians had each, in their own way, constrained the public's understanding of the workings of power in the late twentieth century, and thus shielded malign elite activities from scrutiny. The poststructuralist theories of Laclau & Mouffe (1985) had rendered the elite an 'empty signifier' just as financialisation rendered it an empty referent. 'Rhizomatic' notions of power (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) scrambled attempts at studying up by dispersing power in every direction at once. Du Gay thus compared twenty-first century elites to the antagonist of the 1995 film *The Usual Suspects*, whose identity is concealed until the closing minutes. For Du Gay, the science, not to mention the politics of elitism was hamstrung by the elite's newfound intangibility, which even allowed some of them to play leading roles in 'a populist politics [that] allows the elite to prosper, all in the name of anti-elitism' (Savage & Williams 2008:15).

Although many of its leading figures identified themselves with a post-Marxist 'radical democratic' left (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), Du Gay's views were representative of a broader critique of poststructuralism which alleged that the deconstruction of Marxian class categories like 'elite' and 'working class' constrained the left's ability to mobilise the latter against the former. By the turn of the millennium, many on the left lamented that the replacement of 'essentialist Marxism, with the proletariat as the unique historical subject and so on.' A 'postmodern plurality of struggles' had thus engendered an 'acceptance of capitalism as the only game in town' (Zizek 2000:95). The *New Left's* increasing distance from the labour movement and uneven embrace of New Labour's managerial 'third way' (Giddens 1998) prompted allegations that politics at the dawn of the third millennium consisted of 'a populist right happy to call itself the right, and a technocratic right which calls itself *the New Left*' (Revelli cited in Zizek 2000:129).

Poststructuralism's ambivalent relation to the left belies the double hermeneutic between theoretical and political understandings of the elite. This occurs when scholarly concepts

meant to elucidate the workings of power gradually are gradually integrated into political discourse, thereby altering the power relations they were meant to describe (Giddens 1987). Savage & Williams' (2008) call for the social sciences to 'remember' elites sought to constrain this process, reconstruct a more precise elite concept, and thereby revive a productive politics of anti-elitism. However, elsewhere, the same authors called for the discarding of establishment stereotypes in favour of more subtle and fine-grained understandings of power (Savage 2015). There is nothing contradictory in this—empirical accuracy and politically potency are not mutually exclusive. However, in an age of unprecedented complexity—the two often appear to be in tension.

The depoliticisation of elite theory was hastened by by a new generation of network theorists who sought a more exact analysis of the assemblages of power with greater exactitude than the old monism/pluralism binary would allow (Muller 2015). Erasure of the political battle lines drawn by Mills and Dahl dissolved their egalitarian/libertarian impulses into an entropic centrism (Zanotti-Karp 1970, Zannoni 1978, Higley & Pakulski 2000, Shapiro 2005). Network theory has thus been criticised for 'promot[ing] a sociological perspective that lacks substantive political critique' (Alcadipani & Hassard 2010:420). That said, attempts have been made to integrate network analysis with egalitarian politics. DeLanda's (2016:ix) 'non-Marxist Leftism' reconstructs anti-capitalism according to Braudel's proto-assemblage theory of the world economy as a 'set of sets,' rather than the reductive—if rhetorically compelling—arborescent class structures described by Marx. Theoretical sophistication notwithstanding, elite theory's apolitical trajectory suggests that DeLanda's political project may be constrained by its central premise that 'it is no longer possible to reify capitalism in the manner of society, the state, or the Market' (ibid.). The left's global retreat in the era of deconstruction suggests that reification, although anathema to theory, may be a catalyst for political action.

*Elite theory, Brexit and the Red Wall*

Having examined the political implications of elite theory's major paradigms, this section reviews work on elites in the British context. I begin by summarising the persistent 'myth' of the British 'establishment.' I then examine how the monism-pluralism debate played out in Britain, contrasting the neo-Gramscian 'Nairn-Anderson thesis' with what Smith has called Britain's *Who's Who* tradition of pluralist elite theory. I explore how financialisation, which arguably began in Britain at the behest of the Thatcher governments of the 1970s and 80s (Crouch 2013), has reinforced and disrupted establishment stereotypes in recent decades. Finally, I consider how the elite theory concepts of monism, pluralism and networked power might help us make sense of anti-elite discourses in favour of Brexit, particularly as they manifested in the Red Wall.

After Zannoni (1978), I have discussed how scholars use the term 'elite' interchangeably with terms like ruling class, aristocracy, and oligarchy. In Britain, the elite concept is further complicated by another persistent synonym—'The Establishment' (Fairlie 1955, Thomas 1959, Jones 2014). Smith (2024:345) defines the British establishment as a neo-feudal social network 'connected often through inter-marriage or kinship-based models of hereditary privilege.' Thanks to Britain's continuing 'over-investment in anachronistic aristocratic status practices and symbols' (Smith 2024:342), the establishment is effectively a proper noun in the British context that reliably connotes 'inherited capital, monarchy, the public school system, Eton College, the high professions and the honours system' (Smith 2024:345). These referents can be conceptualised as the parts of a monist whole, or a disjoint set of autonomous power centres.

That these distinct folk-mereological views of the British elite carry political implications has long been evident. A monist account of Britain's neo-aristocratic power structure was a core tenet of the *New Left* in the late 1960s. The Nairn-Anderson thesis (Nairn 1964, Anderson 1964)

held that Britain had industrialized so seamlessly that its feudal aristocracy was preserved, retaining their power into the modern era. British aristocrats were distinct from the properly capitalist oligarchies of other European states (Anderson 1964). The NAT achieved broad consensus on the British left. However, scattered hints of qualified pluralism sometimes appeared. The Miliband-Poulantzas debate, also contested in the pages of the *New Left Review* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, pitted Poulantzas's monist view of the state as a transhistorically capitalist force against Miliband's pluralist view that state power might be co-opted by socialist 'counter-elites' (Wood 1999).

Throughout the same period, the conservative-liberal mainstream of British academia favoured a pluralist analysis of power exemplified by Sampson's series of 'anatomies' of British society (1962, 1965, 1971, 1982, 1992, 2004). Each of the six volumes presented a cross section of Britain's ruling institutions at various points in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The final volume (Sampson 2004) identified no fewer than eighteen apparently autonomous power centres. In descending order of influence, these were: the media, the rich, the prime minister, the treasury, bankers, Whitehall, corporations, defence, pension funds, accountants, parliament, the cabinet, the palace, company directors, diplomats, intelligence, political parties, and academia. Based on empirical observation by Sampson and interviews with elite insiders, each was presented as a discrete domains whose position in Britain's institutional hierarchy was constantly in flux.

Smith (2024:352) has caricatured the pluralist analyses that filled Sampson's early volumes as part of a *Who's Who* tradition of British elite theory, named after the long-running publication of the same name. The magazine has documented the lives and careers of influential people in British high society since 1849 by criteria of 'birth, office, achievement, and celebrity.' In Britain, the pluralist school shares some intellectual space with the 'good chap theory' of government (Priestley 1986:117)—a small 'c' conservative, professedly benign form of

'studying down' wherein the innate morality of the British ruling class is said to foreclose the need for further democratisation, or indeed a written constitution (Hennessy & Blick 2019).

Elite pluralism's noted empirical skew (Shapiro 2005:30) may have constituted an elective affinity with the liberal-conservative impulses of Britain's political mainstream. The authors of the Nairn-Anderson thesis argued that empiricism was one of the 'two great chemical elements' of British conservatism (alongside traditionalism). The 'politics of experience' that results from a strictly empirical worldview 'cannot help but conserve traditional ideological constructs, which are not recognized as such but taken for the real' (Jardine 1985:155). For Anderson (1964:40), empiricism 'faithfully transcribes the fragmented, incomplete character of the English bourgeoisie's historical experience,' while their adherence to tradition 'shackles the future by riveting it to the present.' A specifically empirical conservatism is thus said to 'dominate ... British intellectual life' (Chambers 1993:148), helped in no small part by Britain's historical insularity. Throughout the nineteenth century, a totalizing imperial mindset acted as a 'buffer and barrier' against 'continental' theories of power that placed greater emphasis on immaterial social structures than observable, nameable elites (ibid.).

Stedman-Jones (1983:25) thus observed that the Marxist tradition of British elite theory had been dominated for much of its history by 'a much older whig-liberal tradition' that placed greater emphasis on 'empirico-positivism.' As Zannoni would have predicted, monist and pluralist theorists of Britain's elite have tended to take distinct perspectives of the problem of distribution. Although views on how it was to be achieved varied (Nairn 1973), the monist theorists of the *New Left* consistently argued for wholesale redistribution of power along socialist lines throughout the 1960s and 70s. The liberal-conservative pluralists, conversely, placed greater emphasis on the distributive potential of meritocracy—equality of opportunity, rather than outcome. For instance, Sampson (2004:75) anatomies of British power contended that, overall, Britain's pluralist institutions were structured according to the formula 'Merit =



IQ + Effort,' while Hennessy (2014) unpacked both the tensions and continuities between *Establishment & Meritocracy* in his short book of that name.

British elite theory was complicated by the reconciliation of cultural traditionalism and economic liberalism achieved by Thatcherism in the 1980s (Blyth 2016). The deregulatory 'Big Bang' that followed saw a 'business-like, utilitarian logic' unsettle prior notions of 'cricket-playing, claret-drinking *noblesse oblige*' (Chambers 1993:148). The pluralist Sampson argued that British power relations had been homogenised by the rise of finance in recent years, such that 'the British concept of pluralism is looking less credible' as the nation's institutions ceded autonomy to 'a new elite held together by ... personal enrichment, its acceptance of capitalism, and the need for the profit motive' (Sampson 2004:360). Savage *et al* (2015) concurred that, despite the broadly pluralising tendencies of financial markets, the British elite generally remained a 'small, socially and spatially exclusive group at the apex of ... society, whose economic wealth sets them apart from the great majority of the population.' Where the elites of prior generations were distinguished by highbrow cultural tastes, Savage *et al* argued that contemporary elites obscured their status behind a veneer of 'ordinariness' predicated on a ready command of low-to-middle brow cultural aesthetics.

Whether priority is given to the parts or the whole, the ascent of finance capital has prompted a re-evaluation of establishment stereotypes in Britain. Many argue that images of feudal aristocracy no longer present an accurate picture of power in the UK. For Savage (2015:188) the 1980s were 'the last blast of this old aristocratic culture ... when sociologists such as John Scott could still write about the upper class as a kind of closed, landed elite.' Although 'posh' cultural markers of an imagined golden era of aristocracy are periodically revived in ironic-cum-aspirational forms, 'they do not represent the revival of the landed class itself' (Savage 2015:189). The arguably-ongoing neoliberal era has thus been characterised as 'the end of the *ancien régime* in Britain,' wherein the country's hereditary governing class ceded its leadership such that 'the turn of the *petite bourgeoisie* had arrived' (Anderson 2020:67).

However, reports of the establishment's demise may be exaggerated. The remarkable hegemony of the British public school system—whose alumni account for a third of British prime ministers, including three of the last eight (The Economist 2023)—appears largely unscathed by the rise of finance capital. In Britain, contemporary elite theory often concerns itself with the entanglements between these old and new forms of power. Post/structuralist approaches continue to provide insights into collaborations between finance capital and the arcane status symbols of Britain's ruling institutions which seek to 'unit[e] past and present, capital and kinship, and maintain the stability of class positions into the future' (Smith 2024). As such, where Savage argues that cultural idioms of aristocracy obscure the dominance of finance, others suggest that cultural markers of 'ordinariness' allow the descendants of Britain's feudal aristocracy to maintain their power behind a contemporary façade (Reeves & Freidman 2024). The old aristocratic caricatures may retain more explanatory power than the softening accents of Britain's public-facing elite would otherwise suggest.

Debates about the nature of British elite power shed considerable light on the anti-elite aspects of Brexit discourse, especially in the Red Wall constituencies that form the empirical locus of this thesis. The Brexit narrative's construction of elite power (summarised in Chapter 1.2) appeared to combine both monist and pluralist perspectives. On one hand, Brexit discourse mobilised classic monist tropes about a unified establishment encompassing EU bureaucrats, Westminster politicians, and metropolitan professionals that had betrayed the interests of ordinary people (Mattinson 2020:227). This establishment was portrayed as cohesive and distant from the concerns of Red Wall communities in the deindustrialised North. On the other, Brexit's populist appeal was partly contingent on a pluralist recognition that some elite figures—particularly those Old Etonians who publicly supported Leave (Mitchell 2021)—could be allies rather than enemies of 'the people' (De Cleen & Ruiz Casado 2023).

That Brexit voters living in the North and South of England appeared to be motivated by antagonism toward different power blocs (Lueg & Hartmann 2017) attests to the role of folk mereology in determining the dividing line between elite and non-elite. Leave voters in the South East objected primarily to a Brussels elite said to constrain British sovereignty and opened the UK's borders (Calhoun 2016). At times, this narrative resembled a defence of the old, consecrated sites of British elitism (Westminster, the monarchy, etc) against the threat of a counter-elite identified with the European Union (Mangset *et al* 2019). However, in Northern Red Wall towns, the Brexit elite's boundary was drawn to encompass London and the affluent counties of South East of England (Mattinson 2020:230). The internal contradictions of Brexit's anti-elite narrative(s) would appear to validate constructivist arguments that the elite is not an objective category, but one that is always socially constructed according to the cultural, material, and geographic elements present at any historical conjuncture.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Elite theory has long-recognised that actual elite structures are partly constituted by the folk theories of elite power held by lay publics (Higley & Pakulski 2000:330). 'Mythologies of power' (Barkley 1955:97) give structure to our worldviews, and thus our sense of political possibility. This is apparent from elite theory's own history. The monist tradition of elite theory contains some of history's most prominent leftist thinkers—such as Hobbes (1651), Marx (1848), Gramsci (1971) and Mills (1956). Pluralism, on the other hand, grew out of the explicitly anti-Marxist 'Machiavellian' elite theory of Pareto (Aron 1968), was broadly associated with the political right (Zanotti-Karp 1970).

I have argued that these alignments do not merely reflect the pre-existing political orientations of their progenitors. Folk theories of power and politics are (to some extent) mutually constitutive, because the elite concept always carries political implications. For Zannoni (1978), these are implied by the spatial logics implicit to our ideas about elites. For Shapiro

(2005), by the relative emphases they place on rationalism and empiricism. Whatever the mechanism, the double hermeneutic between academic, lay, and political conceptions of the elite cannot help but shape public understandings of power. In recent decades, scholars allege that poststructuralism and globalised financialisation have disrupted the meanings and referents denoted by the elite concept, obscuring actual elite actions in the public imagination (Du Gay 2008). Network theory has attempted to re-assemble the concept for scholarly audiences, but their complex synthesis has not yet been integrated in any political project of note.

The elite concept is thus a key site of hegemonic struggle whose meaning carries political consequences. However, this process is complicated by tensions between theory and politics, and their respective drives for nuance and clarity. In Britain, elite theorists have made the country's establishment among the most studied and mythologised social formations in world history. Images of aristocracy remain influential in British culture, but whether they obscure a much-diminished establishment or reveal their continuing dominance remains an open question. This thesis attempts to understand the specifically political implications of these images as they manifest in the worldviews of British publics. The literature reviewed in this chapter suggest my analysis must examine the words and images that Red Wall residents use to construct the elite, but also their mereological judgements about how power is configured (see Chapters 5-7). First, Chapter 3 explores how political discourse mobilises the concepts detailed above to challenge, reinforce and normalise elite power.

## Chapter 3. The elite in political discourse

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter continues to lay the theoretical groundwork for the empirical examination of public conceptions of 'the elite' in Red Wall England detailed in Chapters 4-7. Drawing primarily on the discursive paradigm of populism studies (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), I examine how the elite concept tends to be mobilised in political discourse. The word 'discourse' can have many meanings. I use it to refer to 'the meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects' (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000:6). Discursive practices confer meaning by 'establish[ing] meaningful relations between objects' and by 'providing subject positions with which social agents can identify' (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000:3). These include, but are not limited to, speech, text, language, images, cultural norms, ideologies and the identities enacted by human beings. This means discourse is not something that people with pre-existing identities merely engage in. Rather, political identities are 'constantly negotiated and constructed' by social agents and the discourses they encounter (Laclau, 1988: 254).

This chapter explores the elite concept's role in this process. Because discursive meaning depends on relations between objects and subjects, it can never be totally fixed. This relational conception of meaning, I argue, means discourse theorists have developed a distinct set of schemas to characterise the elite concept to those favoured by elite theory (see Chapter 2). Where some elite theorists feel the elite concept has become less politically useful as it was rendered ambiguous by trends in academia and global politics (Savage & Williams 2008, Du Gay 2008), discourse theorists argue that the concept's ambiguity is the source of its rhetorical value. Many discourse theorists embrace the concept's 'open texture' (Zannoni 1978:21). They are more likely to mobilise the elite concept within a politics of emancipation than attempt the Sisyphean task of fixing the concept's meaning once and for all.

Most of the literature reviewed here comes from work on populist discourses that construct the elite as an enemy of the people. However ‘the elite’ is only typically—not universally—a pejorative term in political discourse, and I also review works on discourses that venerate or normalise elite status. The chapter is organized in four stages. The first situates this thesis within the field of populism studies. That is, the academic discipline that has most extensively studied discourse-about-elites. I provide a brief overview of the *ideational* (Mudde 2004) and *discursive* (Laclau 2005a) paradigms of populism research. I argue that my mereological analysis fits better within the latter camp, which stresses that populist discourse always relies on an ‘unavoidable choreography ... between part and whole’ (Stavrakakis 2020:10).

Second, having staked a position within populism studies, I examine those populist and non-populist discourses that construct the elite as a villainous antagonist. I focus on three concepts developed by Laclau and his followers: *empty signifier*, *nodal point*, and *constitutive outside*. All three play significant roles in my analysis of the elite concepts constructed by Red Wall residents in Chapters 5-7. The third section explores ‘elitist’ political discourses that construct the elite as a virtuous protagonist. Finally, I consider the elite concept’s role in discourses that normalise (rather than demonise or celebrate) elitism. These might look to bolster the power relations that underlie an existing *status quo*, or pit distinct ‘counter-elites’ against each other. Together, they suggest that elite concepts are relational, contingent on our own subjective positions within society, and differ with economic status and political orientation. Chapter 4 explains how this thesis intervenes empirically in this debate, via a programme of thirty-six semi-structured interviews with politically-active residents of Red Wall towns all about their discursively constructed notions of ‘the elite.’

### 3.1.1 Situating this thesis with respect to populism studies

The elite concept can be mobilised to challenge, reinforce and/or normalise the power relations present in any given society. However, much recent scholarship focuses on the anti-

elite discourses of populism, which have grown increasingly prominent around the world in the early decades of the twenty-first century (Lewis et al 2018). The field of populism studies is the site of long-running disputes about how the object of their research should be defined (Berlin et al 1968; Ionescu & Gellner 1969, Canovan 1981, Canovan 1999). Two distinct paradigms have achieved broad consensus in different parts of the academy in recent years. The ideational approach associated with Mudde (2004) sits primarily within political science. The discursive approach associated with Laclau (2005a) & Mouffe (1985) has achieved similar status in constructivist sociology.

It is worth pausing to situate this thesis with respect to these paradigms. The two schools of thought agree on many basic details and are in no sense mutually exclusive (Stavrakakis 2014). Both define populism as the mobilisation of a people against a hated elite (Kim 2021). However, they hold distinct understandings of the elite's role in political rhetoric. The key distinction lies in the folk-mereological form that each paradigm attributes to the elites constructed by populist discourse. Laclau and Mudde differ over whether the elite conceived by populists is a cohesive whole or disjoint set of parts. They also advance rather different normative assessments of populism. Mudde argues that populism constructs a monist elite whose fixed, singular identity is conducive to totalitarianism.

For Mudde, 'the core features of the populist ideology are monism and moralism: ... the elite are [therefore] seen as sharing a common set of interests and values' (Mudde 2019:99). The populist elite is here framed as a hermetically sealed whole that frustrates the will of the morally pure people. Laclau's view is more equivocal. He conceives the populist elite as a 'chain of equivalence' that binds together the various frustrations latent within the populist people. This elite is both a whole and a set of parts. That is, a monist synthesis of 'different, but equivalent, forms of subordination' (Olivas Osuna 2022:11). As Grattan (2016:31) puts it, 'by identifying the people and their enemy as unstable categories ... Laclau leaves them open to internal contestation and redefinition.' On this telling, populism is not a struggle against a

monolithic elite-antagonist but an expression of a plurality of democratic demands (Morgan 2020:190). Laclau's followers have explicitly rebuked accusations of monism in his work, stressing that his perspective affirms that 'all discourses are always already dislocated.' As such, 'no monism, holism or homogeneity are attainable' within the elite, nor any other discursive formation (Stavrakakis 2020:14).

This mereological difference entails a set of normative consequences. For Mudde, the monist blocs of populism belie authoritarian and anti-pluralist tendencies (Muller 2016, Galston 2018, Vergara 2020:231). The ideational school regularly treats populism as a necessarily undesirable 'attitudinal syndrome' (Wuttke et al 2020:356). The many quantitative surveys designed around Mudde's definition thus contain specific modules that quantify anti-pluralism and authoritarianism as core 'populist attitudes' (cf. Hawkins et al 2012). These scales have produced valuable insights into the arguably-ongoing 'populist turn' (Inglehart & Norris 2016). However, they are not designed to explore how participants conceptualise the elite in depth. The elite's monist form is assumed to be universal enough that respondents and researchers share a common understanding of the elite's identity irrespective of the social context.

These scales have also been criticised specifically for misapprehending the populist elite's constructed, often-heterogeneous form. Kim & Mondon (2024:985) critique what they term 'the attitudes approach to populism.' They allege that the generic elites mentioned in many quantitative scales are incompatible with the elite concept, whose relational, historically-situated identities must be discursively constructed in every instance. By prescribing a monist elite concept to survey respondents, they allege, quantitative scales may even essentialise the notion of an all-powerful elite in the minds of respondents. If this critique is accurate, the attitudes approach inverts the errors of earlier waves of populism scholarship that sought to tie the populist people to a transhistorical *volkish* archetype (Laclau, 2005a:15).



De la Torre & Mazzoleni summarize the scholarly critiques of the ideational school, and the biases entailed by their 'ahistorical' assumption of a homogeneous populist elite:

Whilst Mudde's concept works well to explain a particular subtype of populism (small right-wing parties in the margins of European politics) it does not travel well to other world areas, or [help] to explain mass based populist parties in Europe. The costs of not distinguishing left and right variants are immense in heuristic and normative terms. ... Instead of assuming that a particular type of populism constitutes its transhistorical essence, we contend that only a complexity-oriented perspective would allow scholars to engage with diverse manifestations of populism worldwide (De la Torre & Mazzoleni 2019:2).

The authors locate their 'complexity-oriented perspective' in Laclau's discursive paradigm, which places greater emphasis on the constructed aspects of the elite<sup>16</sup> (De Cleen 2018). This flexible approach sheds much of the normative baggage entailed by Mudde's mereological reductivism. The discursive school therefore sees populism as a highly dynamic, contingent form of politics that can be wielded by those who wish to emancipate as well as oppress. Rather than anti-pluralist, the discursive approach sees populism as a possible route to 'establishing the us/them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy' (Mouffe 2018:91-92).

Chapter 2 detailed associations between monist and pluralist elite theory traditions and the left- and right-wings of politics. As such, it is important that my analysis avoids *a priori* assumptions about the mereological judgements that Red Wall residents make about the elite, and their normative implications. From hereon, this thesis interprets the elite concept

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<sup>16</sup> A key figure in the social science's discursive turn, Laclau is likely among the chief progenitors of the Keyser Sütze elite phenomenon discussed in Chapter 2 (Du Gay 2008:80).

through poststructuralist discourse theory (PDT), the methodology developed by Laclau & Mouffe (1985) to conceptualise the elite as both a whole and a set of parts.

### 3.2 Anti-elite discourse

Anti-elite discourses construct the elite concept to represent an antagonistic villain, typically to mobilise resistance against the regime they represent. Much of the discourse in favour of Brexit, for instance, promoted antagonism against bureaucratic elites associated with the European Union and/or the British political establishment (Rutherford 2019). When advanced on behalf of a people, anti-elite sentiments form part of populist discourse. Discursive populism researchers have developed an extensive set of concepts to describe the elite's role in these discourses, many of which originate from PDT. Laclau & Mouffe believed that the elite played three key roles in political discourse: as *empty signifier*, as *nodal point*, and as the *constitutive outside* of the people. This section demonstrates how each explains a different facet of the elite's role in populist narratives, and explores alternative accounts of anti-elitism from social identity theory, cultural studies and communication studies.

Empty signifiers are among the most poorly understood, and poorly explained, concepts in PDT. Laclau's work contained at least five definitions of the empty signifier, of which the best known is probably that of 'a symbol that points to an open identity' (Zicman de Barros 2023:5). In plain terms, empty signifiers are words, images and concepts capable of connoting so many meanings simultaneously that they 'signify everything and yet nothing' (Norval 1994:120). The 'emptiness' of any signifier refers to its capacity to represent multiple meanings. There is no such thing as a *completely* empty signifier, of course. A word with absolutely no conceptual content is not a signifier but a mere 'sequence of sounds' (Laclau 2001:36). Emptiness is thus a matter of degree rather than type. All signifiers retain 'a certain residual meaning' even as they 'float' between distinct connotations (Linden 2023).

Laclau (2001) believed that empty signifiers were extremely important to political discourse. By some accounts politics is nothing more or less than a contest between opposing factions who attempt to fix the meanings of empty signifiers like 'democracy,' 'freedom,' 'equality' and so on (Carpentier 2021). Political power is thus held by those best able to hegemonize or 'fill' these empty signifiers with their preferred meanings, and thereby dictate the terms of political discourse (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000:6). For instance, during the Cold War, the capitalist and communist blocs each sought to fix the empty signifier 'liberty' to a meaning sympathetic to their political goals (Shapiro & Steinmetz 2018). The US and Soviet Union thus constructed discursive regimes to promote the values inherent within their political-economic regimes. The US favoured a libertarian 'negative' conception of liberty analogous to freedom *from* (state) interference. The Soviets preferred the 'positive' liberty entailed when the state interferes to provide individuals the resources they need to attain freedom (from poverty, hunger and oppression) (ibid.).

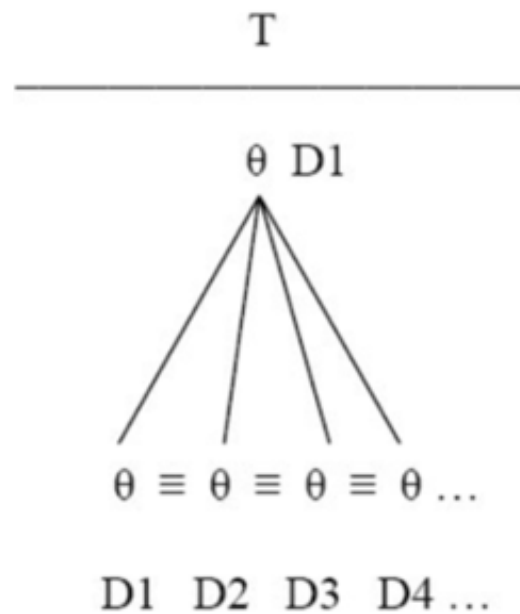
Laclau believed that the elite was a uniquely powerful empty signifier because of its capacity to act as a scapegoat for society's misfortune (Zicman de Barros 2023:8). Anti-elite discourses thus draw many distinct groups together as each projects their distinct—even mutually exclusive—frustrations onto a strategically vague elite<sup>17</sup>. Figure 5 contains Laclau's (2000:303) famous diagram of this process. It depicts the role of the elite (represented by a 'T' for 'Tsar') in the revolutionary discourse of Rosa Luxemburg. In the early years of the twentieth century, Luxemburg sought to unite the Russian people's initially disparate demands for 'peace, bread, and land' (D1, D2, etc) within a single soviet identity (D1). For Laclau, the Russian revolution was possible because the revolutionaries managed to 'fill' the elite signifier with their preferred depiction of Tsarism as a corrupt, exploitative regime. In so doing, they persuaded a sufficient number of Russians that the Tsar was the barrier to their desires that the old regime was overthrown. Luxemburg thus succeeded in temporarily fixing the elite signifier to

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<sup>17</sup> 'The most contradictory contents can be assembled, as long as the subordination of them all to the empty signifier remains (Laclau 2005a:217).'

a meaning that promoted her political objectives. This plural elite construction gathered 'monarchs, landowners and capitalists' together as common 'enemies of the people' (Zicman de Barros 2023:8).

**Figure 5. The elite in political discourse<sup>18</sup>**



Tsarism's centrality in Luxemburg's revolutionary narrative brings me to the second key role played by the elite in Laclau's account of political discourse—that of a 'nodal point.' Nodal points are signifiers whose meanings become partially fixed within a given discourse, such that all other signifiers within the discursive field draw their meaning from their relation to it. In PDT, all meanings arise from relations between signifiers (Saussure 1912). However, nodal points are a disproportionately influential type of signifier by virtue of their (always partial) fixity. In Figure 5, it is because the Tsar is a nodal point in the revolutionary discourse of the time that a coherent ideology was possible wherein objects and subjects were judged according to whether they supported or opposed Tsarism. The elite is typically an at-least-somewhat empty signifier. However, it is not necessarily a nodal point. It becomes one only

<sup>18</sup> Adapted from Laclau (2000:303).

in those discourses wherein the elite plays a lead role, such as populism. Populist discourses typically contain two nodal points – the elite and the people (Mouffe 2005).

The concept of nodal point foregrounds the relational aspects of Laclau & Mouffe's theory of meaning, wherein 'political identities are constituted in relation to each other rather than pre-given' (McKean 2016:4). A particularly important discursive relation is that between a concept and its constitutive outside. For Laclau, signifiers can only be gathered into discursive formations if they are 'stabilized vis-à-vis a common outside' (Marchart 2014:277). For any given discourse, this outside is the antithesis that delimits the boundary of the discourse's system of signification. For instance, discourses around 'communism' and 'nation' are contingent on their respective oppositions to 'capitalism' and 'foreigners.' (Zicman de Barros 2023:7). Constitutive outsides play a crucial role in political identity formation. In Britain, Hoggart (1957) observed that class identities of the mid-twentieth century were constructed around an 'us and them' schema whose meaning derived from a sharp binary distinction between the working and upper classes. Hall (1979:21) likewise described how Thatcherism emphasised distinctions between responsible citizens and various 'folk devils' such as muggers, single mothers, and unproductive benefits claimants.

For Mouffe (2005:25), the elite is only a viable concept when conceived as a part within a larger whole<sup>4</sup> that also includes 'the people' (those internal to society but external to the elite) and 'the other' (those considered external to society). The people and the other are therefore the 'constitutive outsides' of the elite concept (Laclau 1990:39). Populist identities are therefore constituted by their opposition to 'migrants, the elite, or both' (Sabsay 2019:1). Whether a populist discourse places greater emphasis on a vertical antagonism toward an elite, or horizontal antagonism against an ethno-national out-group depends whether the elite and/or the other become nodal points within the populist discourse. Even as they threaten the populist identity, the elite and the other are thus the foundations on which the populist identity is constructed (Marchart 2014:277).

This preoccupation with the boundaries that separate the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of political concepts dovetails with the folk mereology approach employed in this thesis (see Chapters 1.3, 4.2). Different elite concepts—for instance, the monist and pluralist concepts of elite theory (see Chapter 2)—draw distinct boundaries around ‘the elite,’ and those boundaries are constitutive of the elite’s relations to the people and the other. The monist elites of left-wing populism typically produce a binary ‘bottom/middle versus top’ dynamic featuring only the elite and a maximally-inclusive people (Morgan 2020:182). Right-wing populists often position themselves against both the elite and an ethno-national ‘other’ whom they accuse of collusion (Judis 2016). Populisms of the left- and right-wing have thus been conceptualised as ‘dyadic’ (between people and elite) and ‘triadic’ (between people, elite and other) respectively (Revelli 2019:76).

Together, the empty signifiers, nodal points and constitutive outsides that structure the anti-elite appeals of populist discourse produce a ‘template,’ ‘script’ or ‘narrative of empty boxes’ that can be applied in practically any sociohistorical context (Ostiguy & Casullo 2017:11). The box marked ‘elite’ can be filled in any number of ways. For instance by ‘the oligarchy, the Jews, a socially dominant ethnic minority, the financial sector, ... the liberal elite, or white colonizers’ (Ostiguy 2020:77). At its most productive, Aiolfi (2023) suggests that anti-elitism ‘makes visible the terminal forms of those dominant cultural norms rendered invisible by social structure.’ These ‘hegemonic’ attributes tend to pass as ‘unmarked categories’ when considered in isolation (e.g. whiteness, maleness, heteronormativity) but together constitute a coherent, antagonistic identity.

As such, the political character of populism largely ‘depends on the establishment it is mobilizing against’ (Canovan 1999:4). Left-wing populisms typically ‘punch up’ against ‘landed elites, global capital, the bankers, the oligarchs.’ Right-wing populisms, on the other hand, reserve scorn for those they perceive as ‘culturally alien’ to the people, (Ostiguy & Casullo (2017:11). Irrespective of politics, the hated elite is often associated with a ‘high’

cultural register that implies wealth, over-education, and an arrogant 'flaunting' of upper-class sophistication.

In recent years, the Occupy movement exemplifies how empty signification, nodality points and the demonisation of constitutive outsides can be harnessed by anti-elite politics. After the 2007/08 financial crash, Occupy led a series of protests against rising inequality—first in the financial district of New York and then around the globe (Calhoun 2013). The 'elite' within their populist narrative was 'the one percent.' Those outside the top economic percentile were said to belong to a unitary collective identity with minimal barriers to entry ('the ninety-nine percent') Occupy compelled others to judge political actors according to their proximity to the one percent, which came to represent the bankers who had caused the financial crisis and their political patrons.

Occupy is an unusually vivid illustration of the elite concept playing a foundational role in a new political identity. Moreover, it shows how the elite signifier can be re-constructed to suit political ends, and that political identity formation often depends on the reservoir of empty signifiers available in the political conjuncture inhabited by the subject. To be anti-elite in a world where the elite is commonly understood as the top economic percentile entails a fundamentally different set of thoughts and practices than if the elite was constructed to mean those who hold political office, or indeed those born on the second Tuesday of any month. The discursive school of populism studies thereby converges on a similar conception of the elite to the constructivist elite theorists discussed in Chapter 2, who recognised that the elite concept possesses an 'open texture' that cannot be localised to a specific meaning (Zannoni 1978).

However, the two fields differ over the political implications. Some elite theorists call for the term's openness to be minimised as far as possible, to constrain the term's abuse by plutocratic populists (Savage & Williams 2008, Scott 2008, Du Gay 2008). Narrowing the set of referents

connoted by the word, the thinking goes, may allow publics to better grasp the power relations that shape their lives. The concept might then be re-claimed by a productive anti-elite politics. Discourse theorists, on the other hand, tend to embrace the elite's conceptual ambiguity. For them, the elite's open identity is already compatible with a radical democratic politics that seeks to unite oppressed peoples in common cause. Populist peoples can thus be constructed by combining previously discrete groups into new composite identities (Silva & Rossi 2017). This is characteristic of Latin American populisms that 'go to meet the informal sectors, the Indians, the *chusma*, the *descamisados*, the despised outcast, and ... attempts to build a people rather than protect one' (Ostiguy & Casullo 2017:10).

On this telling, it is precisely because the elite is an empty signifier that it is politically potent: 'the so-called poverty of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy' (Laclau 2005b:40). Constraining the elite's openness is, then, both misguided and counter-productive. Practically speaking, 'the emptier the signifier, the more a particular struggle will represent all the other struggles' (Zicman de Barros 2023:7). Moreover, politics is not sociology. Partial fixity of meaning may be achievable among a community of experts who notionally share the goal of describing power relations. In the political realm, where the goal is to control them, any 'filling' of the empty signifier will prompt a response from those with distinct political objectives. Total fixity of meaning is unachievable, and its pursuit may even cede control of a potent empty signifier to one's political opponents.

This does not mean, however, that anti-elite discourses construct the elite *ex nihilo*. To gain traction within a political culture, elites must be constructed from 'tensions that are already latent ... in society' (Ostiguy & Casullo 2017:4-5). As Hall (1979:19) puts it, 'ideological transformation [...] works on the ground of already constituted social practices and lived ideologies.' Anti-elite discourses must then make use of 'those elements which have secured over time a traditional resonance ... in popular inventories.' Indeed Luxemburg's revolutionary discourse was able to rally swathes of the Russian population around a binary class discourse



—despite the absence of a binary class structure—because of deeply rooted distinctions in popular culture between ‘them, the *verkhi*, those at the top, and us, the *nizy*, those at the bottom’ (Smith 2003:31).

The elite is thus a fundamentally constructed category that is ‘always locally and relationally contingent’ (Thurlow & Jaworski 2017:250). As ideas circulate between academic, political, and public discourse any-and-all of the elite concepts discussed in Chapter 2 can become the object of populist opposition. Occupy’s unitary economic, elite resembles neo-Marxist and monist paradigms of elite theory, where power derives from concentrations of economic power at the apex of an arborescent society. As Zannoni’s (1978) work on elite semiotics would predict (see Chapter 2.2), Occupy used this framing to promote a radically distributive discourse in which ‘the problem of distribution’ was simplified for rhetorical effect—as a binary matter of transferring wealth from a single elite to everyone else.

By combining the concepts of empty signifier, nodal point, and constitutive outside, one can construct an account of the elite’s role in political discourse without stepping outside of PDT. However, there is a sense in which the field’s focus on populism constrains scholarship on the elite concept by subordinating it to the people. Laclau’s (2005) seminal *On Populist Reason* dedicates three chapters to ‘constructing the people’ but none to ‘constructing the elite.’ Moreover, of the five empty signifiers identified in Laclau’s work by Zicman de Barros (2023:5) ‘the naming of an antagonist other ... is the most implicit and underdeveloped.’ The elite thus remains ‘under-theorised’ within populism studies (Moffitt & Tormey 2014, Moffitt 2016, Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, De Cleen 2019). Indeed much of the literature reviewed in this section was inferred from work on empty signifiers and/or the populist people, rather than the elite *per se*.

Occupy is again a signal example. Multiple studies have problematised the inclusionary logics of ‘the ninety-nine percent’ (Matthews 2019, Gerbaudo 2022), but the exclusionary practices

bound up in 'the one percent' tend only to be examined as a secondary factor. The Red Wall, too, has mainly been understood as a pro-us moment, rather than anti-them. Echoing Laclau, Mattinson (2020) spends seven chapters on 'the Red Wall and its people' and just one on 'Red Wallers vs Elites.' The elite concept is, of course, inextricably linked to the people, and it is only right that they be studied as a conceptual pair (see Chapter 1.3). However, the tendency of populism studies to view the construction of the people as 'the political operation *par excellence*' (Laclau (2005:159) has implicitly relegated the elite to a supporting role in much of the work meant to elucidate its function.

Laclau credited this aspect of his work to Rousseau's proclamation that:

Before examining the act whereby a people chooses a King, it would be well to examine the act whereby a people is a people. For since this act is necessarily prior to the other, it is the true foundation of society (Rousseau 1987:147).

However this apparent tautology is 'in reality [...] riven with paradoxical tensions' (Bosteels 2016:5). The people only precedes the King the first time around, and only then in a functional rather than ontological sense. For every subsequent generation, the elite's status *qua* the people is a chicken versus egg problem. There are no *a priori* grounds for assuming that the elite is of secondary importance in political discourse.

### *Empirical studies*

Populism has thus primarily been examined as 'an antagonistic form of us-building' (Eriksen 1995, Vulovic & Palonen 2023:548) while the no-less-crucial business of 'them-building' has received less attention. This may reflect positivist assumptions that political identities emerge from their intrinsic attributes, rather than their negative opposition to external others (Mouffe 2005). There have thus been relatively few empirical studies of how publics conceptualise the

elite. Such studies are outnumbered by those that investigate how elites conceptualise publics (e.g. Jerez-Mir et al 2010, Ekengren & Oskarsson 2011, Brookman & Skovron 2018) and their own elite self-images (Jahan & Hamid 2019, Mangset 2015). Chong & Druckman (2011:170) thus refer to 'public-elite interaction' as 'a puzzle in search of a research paradigm.' Yalçın (2022:311) concurs that 'majority-minority relations' are a neglected topic in elite theory.

That said, there are some scattered examples which shed some empirical light on populist conceptions of the elite. The qualitative component of *The Great British Class Survey* (GBCS) saw Savage (2015) interview members of the public about seven class categories. These included 'the elite' alongside the precariat, emergent service sector, traditional working class, new affluent workers, technical middle class, and established middle class. Publics expressed a range of views on elitism, consisting of various condemnatory and celebratory sentiments. Elitism was seen as an oppressive social problem by some, and as meritocratic 'just deserts' for industry and application by others. However, they were less willing to label concrete individuals as elites. For Savage, this aversion reflected a widespread sense that labelling others by their class was somehow distasteful, perhaps revealing of a snobbish tendency to judge others by preconceived notions. Elitism was thus 'a highly loaded moral signifier that contaminated cherished notions of meritocracy, openness and individuality' (Savage 2015:280).

There was also a comparative element to participants' assessments of the elite. Most wished to position themselves as 'ordinary,' and thus somewhere in the middle regions of Britain's class structure. Participants thus used the lower and upper bounds of Savage's (2015) class schema – the precariat and the elite, respectively – as discursive milestones with which to position themselves within Britain's class structure. This tendency is partially supportive of Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) argument that the elite represent a constitutive outside of political identity. However, it does not resemble a simple binary opposition between people and elite. Instead, the elite played a structuring role in identity formation by delimiting the upper bound of the discursive field in which participant identities were constituted. Savage notes that this

tendency, borne of an apparent aversion to class labels, has the unintended consequence of reifying those class identities associated with the extremes of Britain's class structure while obscuring those in the middle. The desire for ordinariness was apparent among elite participants, who often engaged in the obfuscatory practices of disavowal and co-option noted by Thurlow & Jaworski (2017a, discussed in section 3.3) to position themselves in the middle of the pack.

Laclau & Mouffe find stronger support in Marx's (2018) study of anti-elite discourse across seventeen countries. Their findings suggest a correlation between anti-elite discourse and the self-reported political 'efficacy' experienced by its most deprived members. Efficacy here refers to the degree to which participants consider politics responsive to their personal needs and preferences. Indeed, among the most deprived participants, the degree of anti-elite discourse was more predictive of efficacy than were egalitarian and/or redistributive policy proposals. Pietryka & Debats' (2017) historical study found the inverse result, wherein voters' political participation was proportionate to the number of elites in their personal social networks. Staerkle & Green (2018) also identify low political efficacy as a predictor of anti-elitism. Their comparative analysis of right-wing populist discourses suggested that publics in four European countries use four distinct 'strategies of differentiation' to construct the elite as distinct from the people, and as partially overlapping with 'nationals' and 'immigrants.'

In some contexts, then, discourses about elitism appear to trump material inequalities in our assessments of elites. Bouras (2018) attempted to tease apart the respective influence of discourse and materiality on specifically anti-elite sentiment. Drawing on data generated by the large-scale European Social Survey. Their analysis suggests that anti-elite sentiment is strongest when material and discursive inequality are both present simultaneously, such that 'those who perceive themselves as left-behind by economic *and* cultural trends express stronger anti-elite sentiments than even the poorest ... or the most traditionally conservative' (Bouras 2018:89). Other studies suggest that exposure to neoliberal rhetoric intensifies feelings

of anti-elitism (but not anti-immigration sentiment) among participants, irrespective of their exposure to the material consequences of neoliberal economics (Hartwich & Backer 2019).

Empirical works on social identity theory also suggest elite concepts play distinct roles in discourses associated with different political orientations. A study involving US voters found that perceptions of dissimilarity between oneself and elites associated with opposing parties was correlated with participants' tendency to 'sort' their own political preferences to suit partisan norms. However, this correction was asymmetric – showing a significantly higher effect size among republicans. Other studies suggest that individuals tend to accentuate the distinctive features of outgroup elites to set discursive boundaries between themselves and their political opponents (Turner et al 1987, Brewer 1991). Shayegh *et al* (2021) examine how 'elite outgroups' are conceptualised in the nativist rhetorics of political and media elites in the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia. Drawing on data from media broadcasts and political speeches, they document how nativist elites in media and politics masquerade as non-elite by invoking anti-elite rhetoric against their real-or-imagine elites associated with their political opponents.

### 3.3 Pro-elite discourse

The elite concept can also be used to defend, rather than challenge, elites and elitism. Kress *et al* 2001:20 define elitism as any discourse that 'appeal[s] to distinction through excellence or superiority ... as they state apparent truths about the nature of privilege and power.' Pro-elite discourses can be split into two broad camps—those that explicitly venerate elitism, and those that defend the *status quo* that sustains it:

[T]here are at least two direct opposites of populism: elitism and pluralism.

Elitism shares populism's Manichean distinction of society, between good and evil factions, but it holds an opposite view on the virtues of the groups.

Pluralism is the direct opposite of the dualist perspective of both populism and elitism, instead holding that society is divided into a broad variety of partly overlapping social groups with different ideas and interests (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017:28).

The founding document of modern elitism is Burke's (1790) *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which derided the revolutionary overthrow of the French *ancien régime* (LeFort 1988). This critique of anti-elitism was updated for the twentieth century by Ortega y Gasset's (1932) derisory account of the populist spirit of inter-war Europe which—he contended—heralded a transfer of power away from history's rightful aristocrat 'protagonists' to its plebian 'chorus.' For as long as there has been populism, then, there has been anti-populism. Anti-populism has been described as 'a long tradition of pessimism' that seeks to subordinate 'popular sovereignty and democratic participation' (Frank 2020:18) to technocratic expertise and the wisdom of the market (Frank 2000, Freedman 2016).

PDT's breadth and flexibility have allowed the approach to be extended to non-populist uses of the elite concept, as in the emerging field of anti-populism studies (Stavrakakis 2014). Anti-populism venerates elitism as part of a broader denigration of popular sovereignty. These discourses contest populist claims by inverting the opposition between people and elite so that the people and their democratic excesses represent the villains of the piece (Stavrakakis 2018). The concept of anti-populism has in recent years been embraced by the discursive school of populist discourse, which tends to be described in a Laclauian vocabulary of signifiers, relations, and nodal points. For Markou (2020:201), populist antagonism always promotes a backlash wherein 'technocrats, intellectuals and mainstream media blame anti-establishment movements [...] and argue that populism is an irrational and irresponsible phenomenon.'

This does not mean that populism necessarily—or even typically—precedes anti-populism. In many cases, anti-populism is a central-yet-unremarked component of public discourse that is rendered unusually conspicuous when ideological crises prompt populist mobilisations (Stavrakakis 2014:505). As such, anti-populism often represents ‘the main point of departure in discussions *about* populism’ (Galanopoulos & Venizelos 2021:251). Stavrakakis (2020:4) explicitly links anti-populism to the pluralist elite theory of the Cold War-era. He reserves particular criticism for Hofstadter (1955) whose writings on ‘the paranoid style’ have often been used to discredit populism in the American tradition. The consequent chilling effect on popular sovereignty contributes to what Crouch (2004) calls ‘post-democracy,’ wherein politics is seen as the preserve of a managerial elite whose tasks include the suppression of ‘disruptive’ democratic demands by mass publics.

Anti-populist resistance to popular mobilisation is often accompanied by a valorisation of expertise. This allows the anti-populist to claim privileged access to a ‘neutral, allegedly non-political, epistemic superiority based on the possession of a single truth’ (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis 2019:409) to which populists are compelled to conform. Anti-populists associate populism with ‘delegitimization [...] of the media, scientific expertise, and democratic institutions’ (Knight 2021) which amount to a ‘defactualisation’ of public discourse (Sorensen 2021). Waisbord (2018:9) observed that “populism [had] rejected the possibility of truth as a common normative horizon in democratic life” and thus “delegitimated the fact-based institutions that democracies depend on” (Moynihan 2021:20). In Britain, Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis (2019:418) thus characterise Brexit as ‘the inaugural event of the ongoing truth wars.’

The elite concept can also play a role in the formation of elitist identities. Social identity theory argues that political identity emerges from aggregations of ingroup/outgroup judgements made by subjects (Huddy 2013) and that specifically political elites often represent archetypes after whom partisans pattern their own preferences (Huddy et al 2015). In Britain,

Skeggs (1997) has documented how working-class women seek to emulate values and morals associated with the country's dominant class to distance themselves from negative connotations carried by 'working class' identities. This work highlights how the complex 'emotional politics' of class identity can motivate adherence to elite social conventions even when subjects are not consciously aware of an elitist impulse.

### 3.4 Other elite discourses

Some political discourses construct the elite concept in ways that do not fit easily under 'pro' or 'anti-.' These include those that normalise or obscure elitism in service of a *status quo ante*, those that frame elites as possibly-neutral arbiters of democratic claims, and those that pit different sectors of the elite against each other. Thurlow & Jaworski (2017) identify three discursive strategies for normalising elitism: disavowal, co-option and choice/control. Disavowal deflects criticism and/or negative self-regard about one's own elite status, allowing subjects to perform 'elitism without being elitist.' This can include downplaying one's own good fortune, or the concept of elitism *per se*. Co-option refers to the tendency by some elites to adopt progressive or egalitarian causes to implicitly justify their elite status as 'a contemporary form of *noblesse oblige* or philanthropy which persuade us that everyone benefits eventually.'

Elite co-option is a central theme of Kenway & Lazarus's (2017:91) study of international schools modelled after the British public school system, wherein 'old-fashioned, colonial forms of privilege' intersected 'modern expressions of privilege coated in "anti-elitism," "meritocracy," And "diversity."' To maintain plausibility, the authors described how this intersection is constructed to downplay 'structural advantage and material disparity' in favour of the inculcation of personal 'virtues.' The name of the third strategy alludes to Bourdieu's (1984) definition of luxury as 'infinite choice,' and relates to the culturally-acquired 'model of independent agency' (Fiske and Markus 2012) that frames elitism as the result of the



preferences and actions of elite agents, rather than structural advantages of wealth, birth or position.

Others construct the elite as a neutral arbiter of democratic claims. For Tilly (2006), all contention – populist or otherwise – involves three collective actors: movement, countermovement, and government. Social movements must seek recognition as a 'valid interlocutor' from governmental agencies if their 'contentions' are to result in meaningful change. On this telling, social movements need not adopt an anti-elite posture to promote change, so long as they are able to establish fruitful dialogue with elites. Movements, counter-movements, and governments are thus considered co-operants rather than competitors (DeLanda 2006:59). Others distinguish different segments of the elite from each other, often for the purpose of constructing a narrative of inter-elite competition to mobilise one's political allies against elites associated with an antagonist. De Cleen & Ruiz Casado (2023:1005) coined the phrase 'populism of the privileged' to refer to otherwise populist discourses advocated 'by, with, and/or on behalf of the privileged'. Former British Prime Minister, Eton alumnus and Brexit advocate Boris Johnson is cited among the examples of privileged populists. He is also mentioned in Schoor's (2019) analysis of populist discourses which integrate elitist elements, and in Walden's (2000, 2020) account of the 'upper-caste elite of anti-elitists' who, in Walden's estimation, have since the turn of the millennium perverted British democracy via a top-down form of populism he refers to as 'the sickness of the age.'

Johnson is thus a signal example of an elite public figure who borrows the aesthetic trappings of populism to construct political coalitions consisting of a nationalist people and a 'good' elite unified by their shared opposition to a 'bad' elite. Brexit tends to be seen as the apotheosis of Johnson's elite anti-elitism. Indeed Smith (2024:342) argues that the rude health of the British establishment is reflected by the number of 'Old Etonians who have since come to the forefront of British public life' amidst 'a resurgence of imperial nostalgia in public life after the Brexit Vote' (Mitchell 2021). Other examples of elite-led anti-elitism include Poland's

right-wing populist PiS, who have achieved successive electoral successes via an overt strategy of elite replacement (Bill 2020).

In the US, Hall *et al* (2016:73) describe Donald Trump as 'the most spectacular, oxymoronic manifestation of an elite anti-elitism.' Laclau himself noted the possibility of 'pro-elite populism' (Boriello & Jager 2021:25), and distinguished 'populism of the dominated' from 'populism of the dominant early in his career (Laclau 1977:44). He considered Nazism, fascism and other forms of 'ethno-populism' as examples of the latter. These examples are indicative of the right-wing character of many elite-led anti-elite movements. Boriello & Jager (2021) cite Hall's (1988) work on the 'authoritarian populism' of Thatcher's neoliberal project as a productive means of conceptualising 'the so-called populism of the elites in vogue today,' which they link to Berlusconi, Trump and Le Pen.

It was this brand of 'plutocratic populism' that compelled Savage & Williams (2008) to call on the social sciences to 'remember' elites having apparently forgotten them during the era of financialised globalisation. Scholars also point out that modernization discourses associated with financialisation can also serve anti-populist ends by holding existing power relations in place to ensure the smoothing running of the machinic state (Markou 2020). On the surface, modernization stresses an anti-ideological pluralism that simply promotes those best able to provide social goods through sound management and techno-scientific innovation. However, as Schatschneider (1960:35) famously remarked, the flaw in this pluralist heaven is 'that the chorus sings with an upper-class accent.' The argument goes that globalised politics has become too complex and forward-thinking to be stewarded by anyone other than those 'pragmatic, flexible' technocrats 'capable of synchronizing with the pace of modernization' (Stavrakakis 2017:5) and 'accepting quietly the evils of life' (Hofstadter 1955: 13). For Stavrakakis, this managerialist outlook is key to the pejoratization of anti-elite politics. By associating technocracy with forward-thinking modernization and populism with backwards-

looking reaction, politics are presented a false binary between 'a utopia of the future confronting a utopia of the past' (Latour 2016:44).

Scholars have also examined how elitism is conceptualised by elite groups themselves. Thurlow & Jaworski's (2017b) discourse-ethnographic study of elite symbolism at London's *Luxury Travel Fair* and Dubai's *Burj al Arab* hotel. They conclude that ostensibly exclusive elite spaces are often less so than they first appear. The 'geographies of eliteness' are thus deliberately permeable, to replicate the 'strategically slippery' rhetorical strategies that obscure elite practices in the public imagination. These strategies often reproduce a synthetic 'ordinariness' like that identified by Reeves & Friedman (2024) among Britain's social elite. Jahan & Hamid (2019:386) investigated the construction of elite identity by Bangladeshi writers educated in English-speaking institutions. They conclude that, in discursively constructing the elite identity, Bangladeshi elites often emphasise 'achievements, qualifications and attributes rather than *unearned* social privilege.' They also argue that elite status in historically non-Anglophone countries is increasingly seen as contingent on having been educated in the English language 'under the influence of neoliberal globalization.'

Mangset (2015) interviewed eighty-one 'top bureaucrats' in Britain, France and Norway to ask whether and how they conceived their own elite status. They contend that respondents conceived elitism as a multidimensional construct consisting of organizational prestige, education, social status, power, and economic resources. The researchers hypothesized that apparent national attitudinal differences would produce a split between anti-elitist Norwegian and elitist British and French bureaucrats. However, their analysis instead suggested a stronger difference of opinion regarding the forms of capital most constitutive of elite status. Norwegian participants interpreted their elite status as a product of their profession, while British and French bureaucrats attributed their good fortune to wider social networks that intersected their professional and personal lives.

These studies suggest that elitism is often conceived as a relational construct, and that participants' own positionalities often influence the elite concepts they come to hold. Although the language of class is common in these studies, positional analyses were not always based on material, economic circumstances. Discursive practices also play a key role in positioning the elite within the discursive fields conceived by subjects. Moreover, elite conceptions appear to 'behave' differently among different political tribes. This literature provides important background but permits only limited conclusions to be drawn about the research questions posed by this thesis. Most studies were specifically interested in anti-elite sentiments, rather than the elite concept *per se*. When the elite concept was examined specifically, participants were often drawn from elite groups. Little is thus known about public conceptions about the elite, particularly those that apply a neutral or positive lens to the elite concept as opposed to the antagonistic lens entailed by populist discourse. What data we do have tends to be quantitative, and thus ill-suited to exploring how publics conceptualise the elite. This thesis hopes to address this gap by qualitatively examining conceptions of the British elite constructed by residents of Red Wall England, and their implications for political thought.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In Chapter 2, I argued that elite theorists identify the elite concept's political implications with its cohesion. That is, whether the elite is conceived as monist or pluralist. Populism scholars put greater weight on the relations that enjoin the elite to the other categories of political thought. For Mouffe (2005:25), the elite is only a viable concept when conceived as a part within a larger whole<sup>4</sup> that also includes 'the people' (those internal to society but external to the elite) and 'the other' (those considered external to society). Laclau (1990:39) considered these the antitheses (or 'constitutive outsides') of the elite. The concept's flexibility makes it a quintessential empty signifier—a symbol pointing to an 'open identity' (Zicman de Barros 2023:5). It is thus a powerful political descriptor whose meaning is constantly negotiated by

academics, politicians and publics. Hoping to reclaim the concept for egalitarian politics, elite theorists have sought to constrain the concept's meaning (see Chapter 2.2). Conversely, discourse theorists embrace the concept's 'empty' or 'open' semiotics as a potential tool of an emancipatory politics of 'radical democracy' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Drawing on this open, relational conception of the elite, this chapter examined how the concept can be used to challenge, uphold and/or normalise power relations. Whether constructed as a villainous antagonist or aspirational role model, the concept often plays a role in identity formation by functioning as an archetype that subjects can either oppose or emulate.

The concepts explored in this chapter provide a valuable set of tools for analysing the anti-elite discourses of Brexit (outlined in Chapter 1.2). As empty signifier, 'the elite' was a sufficiently open concept to accommodate diverse grievances against Brussels bureaucrats, Westminster politicians, metropolitan professionals, and global finance. As a nodal point, the elite provided a stable reference point that organised the entire Brexit discourse, determining whether institutions, policies, or public figures were positioned as allies or enemies of 'the people.' The constitutive outside function is evident in triadic structure of much Brexit discourse, that positioned a British 'people' against both a Southern, cosmopolitan elite and the immigrant 'other' from beyond the UK's borders. However, as in populism studies more broadly, scholars have paid greater attention to the nationalistic 'people' than the folk theory of elite power constructed by pro-Brexit discourse. The remaining chapters of this thesis contain an empirical investigation of (RQ1) how partisan publics conceive the elite and (RQ2) the implications for their broader worldviews.

## Chapter 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

To better understand ‘the elite’ as a category of political discourse thirty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2022 and September 2023. Interviews examined how residents of the Red Wall region of England conceptualise power and the powerful in contemporary Britain. This chapter explains how the interviews were conducted and analysed in three stages. First, I summarize how data was collected. Second, I explain how interview data were analysed using a modified version of Laclau & Mouffe’s poststructuralist discourse theory (PDT) that conceived elite conceptualisation as an act of ‘folk mereology’ (Rose & Schaffer 2017). Finally, I detail the steps taken to ensure my analysis was reflexive to participant responses, theoretical literature, and the role my own social positionality played in the co-construction of the interviews.

Participants were recruited according to three main criteria: political orientation, socioeconomic status, and geographical location. Each participant was a member of a mainstream political party who lived and/or worked in a Red Wall constituency that was either in the top or bottom tertile for relative poverty in the region. Interviews consisted of five stages (identity, image task, comparison, politics, and origins) designed to address two research questions: how do Red Wall residents conceptualise the elite (RQ1)? And what are the political implications for their political thought (RQ2)? RQ1 was addressed via a thematic analysis consisting of six steps: familiarisation, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, report production (Braun & Clarke 2006). This analysis drew on a set of sensitizing concepts that included discourse, materiality, structure, and agency (Carpentier 2017). RQ2 was addressed via a discourse analysis that drew on six additional sensitizing concepts drawn from elite theory, populism studies and mereology: constitutive outside, equivalence, difference, order, monism, and pluralism.

## 4.2 Data collection

### 4.2.1 Recruitment

The empirical studies detailed in Chapter 3 suggest that people in different social positions tend to conceptualise the elite in distinctive ways. To ensure that this study was sensitive to participants’ material life conditions, they were recruited according to political orientation, geographic location, and socioeconomic status. Each participant was a member of a mainstream political party who lived and/or worked in a Red Wall constituency that was either in the top or bottom tertile for relative poverty in the region. Participants were not explicitly told that they had been recruited according to these criteria. The rationales behind each criterion are explained below. Table 5 contains selected characteristics of each participant.

#### *Political orientation*

Participants were recruited from mainstream political parties of the left, right and centre of British politics active in the Red Wall. Parties were considered mainstream if they held at least one seat in the UK House of Commons after the last UK General Election prior to data collection, which occurred in 2019. This included the Green Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative Party<sup>19</sup>. The Greens and Labour are broadly considered parties of the left/centre-left in the UK context. The Liberal Democrats are considered a party of the centre and the Conservatives a party of the right/centre-right (Bale 2017).

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<sup>19</sup> Other parties represented in the House of Commons during data collection (2022/23) included the Democratic Unionist Party, Plaid Cymru, Scottish National Party, Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party. These parties were not approached as none were active in the Red Wall.

**Table 5. Participant characteristics (n=36)**

Orientation	Alias	Party	Age <sup>20</sup>	Gender	Racial identity	Class	Education
<b>Left-wing</b>	GRN1	Green	70-74	Male	White	Working	Vocational
	GRN2	Green	18-24	Non-binary	White	Working	A-level
	GRN3	Green	75-79	Male	White	Middle	Professional
	GRN4	Green	35-39	Male	White	Working	Degree
	GRN5	Green	55-59	Female	White	Working	Degree
	LAB1	Labour	25-29	Male	White	Working	A-level
	LAB2	Labour	45-49	Male	White	Not sure	Degree
	LAB3	Labour	30-34	Male	White	Middle	Degree
	LAB4	Labour	50-54	Male	Black	Working	Degree
	LAB5	Labour	70-74	Male	White	Middle	Degree
	LAB6	Labour	80-84	Female	White	None	Degree
	LAB7	Labour	70-74	Male	White	None	Degree
	LAB8	Labour	40-44	Male	White	Work/Mid	Degree
	LAB9	Labour	65-69	Male	Other	Middle	Degree
	LAB10	Labour	18-24	Male	White	Middle	A-level
	LAB11	Labour	70-74	Female	White	Middle	Degree
	LAB12	Labour	60-64	Male	White	Middle	Degree
	LAB13	Labour	35-39	Male	White	Not sure	A-level
	LAB14	Labour	70-74	Female	White	Middle	Degree
	LAB15	Labour	70-74	Female	White	Other	Degree
	LAB16	Labour	70-74	Female	White	Other	Degree
	LAB17	Labour	35-39	Female	White	Middle	Degree
	LAB18	Labour	60-64	Female	White	Middle	Degree
<b>Liberal</b>	LIB2	Lib Dem	85+	Male	White	Middle	Degree
	LIB1	Lib Dem	50-54	Male	White	Middle	Degree
	LIB3	Lib Dem	50-54	Female	White	Work/Mid	Degree
	LIB4	Lib Dem	70-74	Male	White	Other	A-level
	LIB5	Lib Dem	50-54	Male	White	Working	GCSE
<b>Conservative</b>	CON1	Cons.	70-74	Male	White	None	Degree
	CON2	Cons.	60-64	Male	White	Middle	Degree
	CON3	Cons.	65-69	Male	White	Working	Degree
	CON4	Cons.	Withheld	Male	White	None	Degree
	CON5	Cons.	55-59	Female	White	None	GCSE
	CON6	Cons.	65-69	Male	White	Working	GCSE
	CON7	Cons.	25-29	Male	White	Not sure	Degree
	CON8	Cons.	18-24	Male	White	Not sure	A-level

<sup>20</sup> Median age bracket: 50-54 years.



I decided to focus recruitment on mainstream parties after early overtures to two non-mainstream parties<sup>21</sup> revealed they each had little constituency-level organisation in the North of England, and therefore no practical means of circulating invitations among members in the Red Wall. There were, then, few signs of political radicalism among participants. Only one disclosed that they had ever been a member of a political party outside of the British mainstream. LAB7, a man in his early seventies, joined 'various Trotskyist groups' during the 1970s and 80s and participated in entryism campaigns that sought to effect industrial change 'by infiltration.' His political practice had grown less radical as he had grown older<sup>22</sup> and - like most participants - he considered himself an 'ordinary member' of a mainstream party by the time of his interview. Eleven others (31%) either held some position of authority in their local party or had done so previously. The sample thus included four current-or-former local party councillors, three party chairs, two deputy/vice chairs, two Women's officers and a party secretary. Their positions likely provided these participants with distinctive insights about party elites but may also have discouraged the expression of views that challenged official party positions.

For the purpose of analysis, political orientations of individual participants were inferred from the political biographies they shared during the first phase of the interview. Drawing on Bobbio's (1994) work on social justice at the political left, right and centre, I judged participants left-wing if equality was among their primary political concerns, and conservative if they preferred meritocratic or 'retributive' variants of social justice. I judged participants liberal if they sought a relatively 'synthesis' of equality and inequality (Drochon 2022:334). Political orientation corresponded with party membership in all but one case (LIB2 identified

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<sup>21</sup> UKIP and Reform UK.

<sup>22</sup> 'When I was younger I thought creating an egalitarian society quickly and easily was possible. [..] You have to study history to work out why it didn't work. It's probably not plausible to think of human beings who can be transformed like blank pieces of paper. [..] That's why I've ended up a member of a party that I wish was a bit more egalitarian than it is. And I'll try to make it so. But I have no belief that the world will change dramatically as a result of anything I do' (LAB7).

as left-wing despite being a member of a notionally liberal party). The sample thus consisted of twenty-four left-wing, four liberal and eight conservative participants.

Participants were not explicitly told that they had been recruited according to specific criteria. However, most intuited that I was interested in their conceptions of the elite *qua* their political orientation, because they had been contacted to participate via their local party. The study thus consistently 'hailed' participants as politicised – rather than placed, classed or gendered – subjects (cf. Althusser 1970:163). This may have strengthened the study's sensitivity to political logics by foregrounding them in participants' minds. However, it does not mean that political orientation is *a priori* more influential on elite conceptualisation than place, class, or gender. Only that politicised subjects tend to give politicised answers.

As the title of this thesis makes clear, this was not, then, a study of the general public<sup>23</sup> so much as four decidedly 'partisan publics.' I decided to recruit only from political parties and via party gatekeepers to centre conceptions of 'the elite' in explicitly *political* thought (RQ2) within my analysis. However, this likely introduced a number of confounds to the analysis detailed in Chapters 5-7. First, although I set out to examine elite concepts in 'Red Wall England,' studies consistently show that British political party members are demographically distinct from the broader population. The average party member is older, whiter, more male, more affluent<sup>24</sup>, and more likely to be heterosexual than the average member of the British population (Bale et al 2018, Burton & Tuncliffe 2022). These demographic factors are constitutive of the subject positions from which participants spoke, their experience of various forms of privilege and their opposites, and therefore of their ideas about elites.

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<sup>23</sup> Which does not, in any case, exist (Lippmann 1922, Bourdieu 1979, Laclau 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Steps taken to mitigate the skew thus introduced to the class composition of the sample are detailed below (under 'Socioeconomic Status').

Second, participants may have felt obliged to respond in ways that aligned with their perception of party consensus. Conversely, they may also have been motivated to subvert my expectations of a typical Green, Labour, Liberal Democrat or Conservative member. Chapter 7.3 details how some Labour party members (including LAB8 and LAB13, a self-described 'bad lefty') appeared to enjoy challenging party orthodoxies around 'identity politics,' and efforts by several Conservatives to distance themselves from stereotyped portrayals of 'callous Tories' by stressing their personal concerns about social inequality (CON2, CON3, CON6). Recruitment by political orientation may then have nudged participants towards positions they would be less likely to emphasise had their party membership been hidden from the interviewer. It also means interviews involved people with relatively high levels of political engagement, who may have spent more time thinking about the politics of the elite than participants chosen by other means.

Third, this thesis is partly motivated by a desire to understand the anti-elite aspects of populism in general and Brexit in particular. However, the exclusive focus on political party members likely biased responses towards each party's respective stance towards Brexit. Brexit and the broader 'populist wave' of the mid-2010s were central concerns of British politics for much of the period since the 2016 referendum (Evans & Menon 2017). This is clear from the Conservatives' victory at the 2019 General Election following then-party leader Johnson's promise to 'Get Brexit Done' (Ford *et al* 2021), and the ongoing strength of Reform UK (formerly 'The Brexit Party') in opinion polls as I write in July 2025<sup>25</sup>. Each of Britain's major political parties have thus expended considerable energy staking out a definitive position on Brexit, which has surely shaped the ideological composition of their membership<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Skinner, G. (2025). *Reform's Ipsos record 9-point lead over Labour, as public satisfaction with government nears lowest point recorded under a modern Labour administration*. [online] Ipsos. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/reforms-ipsos-record-9-point-lead-over-labour-public-satisfaction-government-nears-lowest-point> [Accessed 2 Jul. 2025].

<sup>26</sup> For instance, the 30% of Liberal Democrat voters said to have voted Leave (Ashcroft 2016) may eventually have felt unwelcome in a party whose subsequent campaign slogans included 'Bollocks to Brexit' (BBC 2019).

It seems reasonable to assume, then, that those with populist and/or anti-EU mindsets were likely to have been overrepresented among Conservative members, and underrepresented among Green, Labour and (especially) Liberal Democrat members during the data collection period (2022/23). Moreover, populism's status as a (largely negative, right-wing-coded) 'buzzword' in much recent media commentary (Glynos & Mondon 2019) may have motivated some participants to distance themselves from populist discourse, even if their views might otherwise resemble academic accounts of populism as anti-elite and pro-people (e.g. Canovan 1999, Mudde 2004, Laclau 2005). Partisan recruitment may also have excluded advocates for the 'Lexit' case for a socialist withdrawal from the European Union (see Chapter 1.2) who were presumably less likely to remain members of the Green and Labour parties as each took up indifferent-to-antagonistic stances toward Brexit after the referendum.

### *The Red Wall*

The elite is an increasingly prominent category in British public discourse (see Chapter 1.2). Allusions to the elite reached an apotheosis during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign. Brexit is second only to Trumpism as an exemplar of twenty-first century populism. Much was made of relatively high levels of Brexit support in historically left-leaning towns in the North of England (Ford et al 2021). To understand the role of the elite in specifically British political discourse (RQ2), I focused recruitment in these so-called 'Red Wall' constituencies. It was hoped a place whose political character had apparently shifted from left to right as part of a populist—and thus anti-elite—movement would shed light on the elite concept's political implications.

Red Wall constituencies were identified according to Kanagasooriam & Simon's (2021) four-point criteria:

1. Not Conservative after 2017 UK General Election.
2. Conservative vote share growth >5% between 2010 and 2017.
3. Conservative vote share at >25% at 2017 UK General Election.
4. Leave vote share >55% at 2016 Brexit referendum.

Twenty-seven constituencies satisfied these criteria in the North of England. Recruitment focused on eighteen constituencies that made up the upper and lower tertiles for relative poverty. Figure 6 shows the location of these target constituencies. Most were concentrated along the M62 corridor between Liverpool and Hull. The three exceptions were Bishop Auckland, Tynemouth, and Workington further North. The political geography of the Red Wall was a significant factor in the present study. That said, the Red Wall is not a monolith, and I tried to maintain a critical perspective towards the stereotypes associated with the region.

**Figure 6. Target constituencies**



Participants were ultimately recruited from sixteen constituencies: Bolton West, Salford & Eccles, Sheffield Central, and Wakefield: Batley & Spen (n=2), Bishop Auckland (n=4), Bolton North East (n=1), Bolton West (n=1), Bradford South (n=2), Halifax (n=14), Heywood & Middleton (n=1), Hyndburn (n=2), Manchester Gorton (n=1), Rother Valley (n=1), Salford & Eccles (n=1), Sheffield Central (n=1), Wakefield (n=2), Wirral South (n=1), Workington (n=1), and York Outer (n=1). These included twelve target constituencies and four contiguous 'non-target' constituencies. Recruitment was relatively even between constituencies, most of which contributed between one and four participants. Only two provided more than two participants. Although the same recruitment methods were employed in each constituency, Halifax was a notable outlier – contributing fourteen (38%) of the thirty-six participants. The overrepresentation of Halifax residents was largely due to the enthusiasm shown by the Halifax constituency Labour party, no less than eleven of whom elected to participate in the study.

#### *Socioeconomic status*

The elite is a fundamentally relational category that is always conceived relative to our own social position. To understand how the elite is conceptualised (RQ1) it is, then, advisable to speak with people from relatively deprived and affluent areas of the Red Wall. Recruitment focused on the upper and lower poverty tertiles of the twenty-seven Red Wall constituencies that satisfied Kanagasooriam & Simon's (2021) criteria. Tertiles were derived from the UK House of Commons Constituency Relative Rate of Poverty index<sup>27</sup> (CRROP)—the only metric of relative deprivation for which there was recent, high-quality data at constituency level. CRROP denotes the percentage of households in each constituency where income is less than 60% of the national median. CRROP ranges 6-53% nationwide but is heavily skewed with few constituencies concentrated at the least deprived end.

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<sup>27</sup> Source: House of Commons Library (2021): <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/constituency-data-child-poverty/>.

Each tertile contained nine constituencies. The deprived tertile (CRROP 28-36%) contained Batley and Spen, Bishop Auckland, Bolton North East, Bradford South, Burnley, Great Grimsby, Halifax, Hyndburn, and Oldham East & Saddleworth. The affluent tertile (CRROP 11-21%) contained Bury South, Chorley, Hemsworth, Heywood & Middleton, Penistone & Stocksbridge, Rother Valley, Tynemouth, Wirral South, and Workington. Deprived constituencies lay between the 12th and 66th percentiles of the nationwide range, and the affluent tertile between the 88th and 96th percentiles. Target constituencies thus spanned most of the UK's CRROP distribution. Relative poverty was preferred to absolute poverty to ensure sensitivity to the socially constructed elements of poverty, which *are contingent on one's* relative well-being to the rest of society.

As with political orientation, participants' class identities were not inferred from their constituency alone. A demographic questionnaire asked participants to indicate which of four class identities they most identified with (working/middle/upper/other) and indicate their highest level of educational attainment, asset ownership, trade union membership, and employment status. These data provided insight into the subjective and objective class identities of each participant. Table 6 indicates how many participants were recruited from each constituency, poverty tertile and political party.

Participants were not evenly distributed in terms of place, poverty or politics. The more deprived tertile was overrepresented, providing twenty-seven of the thirty-six participants interviewed (75%). Labour party members were also overrepresented, accounting for 47% of all interviews. The remaining participants were spread evenly among the Green, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties. The sample therefore contains more participants from notionally left-wing (63%) than conservative (22%) or liberal (16%) parties.

**Table 6. Recruitment by place, poverty, party**

Place	Poverty	Party				Total
		Grn	Lab	Lib	Con	
York Outer	0.10				1	1
Wirral South	0.11				1	1
Bolton West	0.19				1	1
Workington	0.19			1		1
Rother Valley	0.20				1	1
Heywood & Middleton	0.21	1				1
Salford & Eccles	0.23		1			1
Wakefield	0.24	2				2
Sheffield Central	0.25	1				1
Bishop Auckland	0.28		3		1	4
Batley & Spen	0.31			2		2
Halifax	0.31		11	2	1	14
Bolton North East	0.33	1				1
Bradford South	0.33		2			2
Hyndburn	0.33				2	2
Gorton	0.41		1			1
		5	18	5	8	36

*Contacting participants*

Representatives of local Green, Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Conservative parties in eighteen target constituencies were contacted by e-mail using contact details from party websites and Facebook pages. They were asked to circulate an invitation<sup>28</sup> to participate among their members. Invitations made clear that the project was seeking to understand the general public's views of either 'the elite' or 'power and the powerful.' To avoid priming

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix 2 for sample invitation text.



participant responses, invitations did not emphasise the sampling characteristics (political orientation, residence in the Red Wall, socioeconomic status) and no incentives were offered to encourage participation. Where parties were unresponsive to e-mail, I attempted to contact them through Facebook messenger and/or telephone calls to local party offices.

Some party representatives took on an active mediator role, e-mailing potential participants and 'vouching for' the project on my behalf. However more often they simply circulated the invitation among their membership and directed respondents to me. The active role played by party representatives in the recruitment process likely introduced additional confounds to those already discussed. Representatives may have favoured potential participants with similar views to themselves and/or those they expected to give a 'good account' of their party. This potential bias should be considered when reviewing the analysis in Chapters 5-7.

Invitations stated participation would involve (i) a semi-structured interview lasting approximately one hour in which participants were asked a series of questions about Britain's elite, (ii) an 'image task' in which participants were asked to present and describe an image which they feel represents the contemporary British elite, and (iii) a demographic questionnaire. In addition to these invitations, participants were asked at the end of each interview to direct other potentially-interested members of their local parties to contact me. Six of the thirty-six participants (15%) were recruited through this secondary stream of 'snowball' sampling. Some party representatives expressed an interest in being interviewed themselves. These requests were always obliged so long as the representative fulfilled the project's selection criteria.

Invitations were only sent to party representatives in the eighteen target constituencies listed above. However, I was sometimes contacted by potential participants who lived outside the target constituencies. This was usually for one of three reasons: (i) party memberships were sometimes registered to a different constituency than members' home address, (ii) party

representatives circulated the invitation to multiple constituencies, and (iii) the potential participant had heard about the project via word of mouth, rather than their local party. I admitted potential participants from outside target constituencies so long as they (i) were current party members who (ii) lived and/or worked in a constituency contiguous to a target constituency. If either of these criteria were not satisfied the potential participant was not recruited.

Five participants were recruited from four 'non-target constituencies' (Bolton West, Manchester Gorton, Salford & Eccles, Wakefield). This meant that 14% of participants were recruited from just outside of Kanagasooriam & Simon's (2021) Red Wall. I deemed this an acceptable relaxation of the project's recruitment criteria, as the Red Wall is ultimately a subjective concept with indefinite geographical boundaries. Indeed Kanagasooriam & Simon (2021) 'fine-tuned' their list of Red Wall constituencies according to their own subjective judgements about which towns best connoted the rightward political drift the concept was supposed to represent. Once they had expressed an interest in being interviewed, participants were asked to complete a consent form and demographic questionnaire.

Conservatives were less responsive to invitations to participate than Greens, Labour members and Liberal Democrats. This came as some surprise. Recruitment focused on the Red Wall because of its recent history of notionally right-wing populism. I thus expected Conservatives to have more to say about elites than members of other parties. Recruitment materials were amended to encourage Conservative participation. The new wording was based on informal feedback from Conservatives who declined to participate<sup>29</sup>, and a review of the discursive and sociological literature discussed in chapters 2 and 3. The review showed that 'power' was the most common synonym for 'the elite' among populism scholars and elite theorists. Laclau

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<sup>29</sup> Although the invitation did not suggest otherwise, one Conservative party representative objected to being contacted as they were 'certainly not an elite.' Another joked that I would be better off contacting Labour party members as 'they are more interested in fighting the class war!' No such responses were received from Green, Labour or Liberal Democrat members.

(1977:167) himself cited 'the people/power contradiction' as a fundamental component of political discourse and 'an antagonistic frontier between the people and power' as one of two 'clear preconditions of populism' (2005:74). Hall (1979:17) likewise describes Laclau's theory of hegemony as a contest between the people and 'the power bloc.' Many seminal elite theory works contain the word 'power' in their titles including Mills' (1956) *The Power Elite* and Dahl's (1957) *The Concept of Power*. Indeed scholars sometimes refer to elite theory as 'the power literature' (Shapiro 2005:4).

Invitations were re-circulated among Conservative representatives with all references to 'elites' and 'the elite' amended to 'the powerful.' The title of the project was also amended from 'Who are the Elite?' to 'Power in British Society.' Conservatives were somewhat more responsive to the new wording. This suggested that Conservatives were specifically averse to the 'elite.' This aversion was evident in several defensive/hostile responses from Conservative members to invitations containing the original 'elite' wording. Several factors may explain Conservative aversion to discussing 'the elite.' The Conservative Party were in government for the entirety of the data collection process, and participants may have understood 'the elite' to be analogous of 'current ruling party.' As such they may have felt in some way implicated by the term 'elite.' Conservatives may also have assumed that a PhD student based in a Sociology department were likely to be left-leaning, and therefore liable to misunderstand or misrepresent their views. Alternatively I may have overestimated the political neutrality of the term 'elite.' Indeed that the elite is constructed differently by different ideological groups is a core assumption of this thesis. The very idea of an 'elite' may be more complex or indeterminate within conservative worldviews than others, and therefore more difficult to render in conversation.

Women were also less responsive than men to the initial invitations. Of thirty-six participants, twenty-five identified as male, ten as female, and one as non-binary. The proportion of non-male participants (31%) is therefore unrepresentative of the North of England whose

population is 51% female (UK census 2021). While political party members are more likely to be male than the general public on average (Poletti *et al* 2018), the proportion of non-male participants was substantially lower than the membership of most of the target parties (Green 46%, Labour 47%, Lib Dem 37%) although it was similar to that of the Conservative Party (29%). Prior research suggests that power structures within local political parties elevate the voices of male members, such that they are more likely to volunteer their opinions (Kristensen & Ravn 2015). Biased research recruitment deriving from these power dynamics may then '[reify] rather than explore' (ibid.) the fields they seek to explain.

Efforts to rectify this imbalance were only partly successful. The proportion of non-male participants increased from around a tenth to just under a third after local parties were asked to re-circulate the invitation with a note that I specifically wished to speak with female and non-binary members. Invitation wording was not otherwise amended, as the aversion to the term 'elite' evident among conservatives was not evident among female respondents. These efforts may have introduced a further skew however, as participants recruited via gendered invitations were likely primed to perform gendered identities during their interviews. Seven of ten female participants were recruited via gendered invitations. Findings should be interpreted with this in mind.

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

Interviews are not a common tool of discourse analysis. Most PDT research takes a supply side approach that typically focuses on the public proclamations of political figures, parties, and movements. My research questions address the demand side of political discourse. That is, how a particular signifier—the elite—is received, understood and conceptualised by non-elite publics. My analysis examines the elite concept's role in the discursive practices 'sedimented' within participants and the identities they perform (Laclau 1988). Participant identities offer a rich, 'living' basis for discourse analysis than political texts, speech or

images. The semi-structured interview schedule, image elicitation task and demographic questionnaire were all piloted to ensure they were easily comprehended and appropriately attuned to the research questions.

Interviews were conceived as 'interactional objects' co-constructed with participants by the analyst (Roulston 2010) from which only interpretations could be drawn, rather than 'absolute truths' (Mishler (1986: 112). PDT holds that there is no stable or essential identity 'beneath' participant accounts (Stavrakakis 1999) as identities are constantly constructed, performed and embodied. Interviews thus combined constructionist, postmodern and romantic interview practices (Roulston 2010). To encourage participants to give substantive accounts, I typically responded to their statements with 'soft validation' irrespective of my 'actual' opinions. It was hoped that this soft-validation approach was the most likely to put participants at ease and reassure them that their views would be respected. Still, it is acknowledged that these responses are no more 'authentic' than responses elicited via an interview style entailing challenge and discomfort.

Participants were asked to choose whether the interview would take place via telephone, Zoom, or in-person at a safe public place of their choosing. First preference was to conduct interviews face-to-face either at a public place or the participants' home.. Telephone/Zoom interviews were included to provide participants uncomfortable discussing potentially contentious issues 'freedom and anonymity from the demands of face-to-face conversation' (Sullivan 2021:263). Participants were asked to conduct telephone/Zoom interviews from a safe place where they would not be overheard by others. Before interviews began, I provided each participant with a short briefing reminding participants of the subject matter and estimated runtime (sixty minutes). Participants were told not to worry about digressing from the interview schedule, that 'non-opinions' were preferable to contrived opinions, and that I was specifically interested in their subjective views. They should not, therefore, consider the interview a test of their 'objective' knowledge of the elite. I also assured participants of their

unconditional right to withdraw from the interview at any time, and that any request to stop the interview would be granted without challenge. If participants grew upset during the interview they could either pause for a few minutes or withdraw entirely.

Once participants confirmed that they were satisfied with these terms, the audio recording was initiated and we began working through the interview schedule. This consisted of five stages (see Table 7) that assessed participants' own political leanings, their view of the contemporary elite, the relations they conceived between the contemporary elite and elites in different times and places, the elite's role in their political thought, and the formative influences on their elite concept. First, the identity stage asked participants to explain how they had come to join their political party, how they would describe their political orientation, and the issues they considered central to their political identity. These responses were used to assess whether the participant was predominantly left-wing, conservative or liberal. Political orientation was inferred to support RQ2, which sought to understand specifically political implications of the elite concept. Cognizance of participants' political orientation helped me detect instances where the elite concept appeared to align and/or clash with participants' broader worldviews.

Second, participants were asked to present a pre-prepared image they felt represented the contemporary British elite, and answer a series of follow-up questions about the image. Third, participants were asked how the elite had changed during their lifetime, and how the British elite compares to elites in other parts of the world. These questions encouraged participants to clarify the relations they conceived between distinct elites and/or between the elite and the rest of society. They also gauged whether participants conceived the elite in historical or transhistorical terms.

**Table 7. Semi-structured interview schedule**

Stage	Topic	Prompt	Follow-up
1	Identity	How did you come to join your party?	How would you describe your political identity?
			What is most important to you in politics?
2	Image	Present an image that best represents the elite.	Why did you choose this image?
			Was choosing an image difficult?
3	Comparison	Are the elite the same all over the world? Has the elite changed during your lifetime?	Did you consider other images?
			How? Why?
4	Politics	How important are the elite to your political views? Would you like to change the elite? Do the elite ever influence your actions (e.g. Brexit)?	How? Why?
5	Origins	Where do your views about the elite come from?	Any influential experiences/people/institutions/media?
*	Subsidiary prompts	How concentrated and/or dispersed is elite power?	

Fourth, participants were asked about the elite's role in their political thought. These questions assessed how important the elite were to their political worldview, whether and how they would change the elite if they were given the chance, and if their opinions about elites ever influenced their actions. I specifically asked participants whether feelings about elites influenced their voting behaviours, particularly at the notionally populist 2016 Brexit referendum<sup>30</sup>. Fifth, participants were asked to explain where their opinions about the elite had come from. Follow-up questions asked whether any particular people, experiences, institutions or media had shaped their views of the elite. Finally, participants were asked whether they had anything they wished to say in summary, or any themes that had not arisen during the interview which they had intended to discuss.

Although I was not yet familiar with the concept of mereology, I inferred that participants' part/whole judgements about the elite were strongly correlated with party membership early in the data collection process<sup>31</sup>. This prompted me to seek out relevant theoretical literature. I thus discovered Higley's (2000) account of elite theory's monism-pluralism debate and, soon after, Rose & Schaffer's (2017) work on part/whole reasoning by non-experts (folk mereology). The subsidiary prompt 'how concentrated and/or dispersed is elite power?' was added to the interview schedule. This did not entail a substantive change to the semi-structured interview schedule, nor did I prompt participants for their mereological judgements unless they first invoked concepts such as concentration, dispersal, partness, or wholeness.

All interviews were recorded using my iPhone or Zoom's record function. Once interviews were over, I immediately transferred the recordings, images and completed questionnaires to a secure University of York Google Drive folder. I backed up all files on a personal hard drive. I then transcribed each interview. All potentially identifying information about

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<sup>30</sup> Findings from Brexit discussions were published in Dinsmore (2024).

<sup>31</sup> My contemporaneous notes from 24 November 2022 (one month after data collection began) suggest that 'there is a centre to left-wing accounts that isn't there for conservatives, liberals.'



participants was anonymised. 'Microanalyses' were carried out on the first ten interview transcripts (Carpentier 2017) which were assessed against Kvale's (1996:145) 'best practices' for qualitative interviewing. These are (i) proportion of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant responses. (ii) Ratio between length of interviewer questions and participant responses. (iii) Extent of interviewer follow-up to clarify responses. (iv) Degree to which interviews are 'self-communicating' stories.

### *Image task*

Participants were told ahead of time that they should 'bring along an image which you feel represents the elite to discuss at the beginning of the interview.' Drawing on Carpentier's macro-textual conception of discourse as 'any and all signifying practices,' the image task was included to access non-linguistic or imaginary forms of meaning attributed to the elite. That is, those aspects of the elite difficult to articulate via speech. The image task encouraged participants to begin thinking about their responses in the days leading up to the interview, such that most participants arrived with a reasonably clear elite concept to discuss.

Participants were asked to present their image and the reasoning behind it. I sometimes asked participants to elaborate using three follow-up prompts: 'why did you choose this image?' 'How easy was it to choose an image?' And 'did you consider other images?' Most (86%) of the thirty-six participants participated in the image task. Three (8%) chose to present multiple images. Four participants chose to give verbal presentations of the elite in lieu of an image, and one participant recused themselves from the task having been unable to select an image. Thirty-five images were presented in all.

**Table 8. Demographic questionnaire**

Item	Response options	Source
1 Age	18-24; 25-29; 30-34; 35-39; 40-44; 45-49; 50-54; 55-59; 60-64; 65-69; 70-74; 75-79; 80-84; 85+; Prefer not to say.	2021 UK Census
2 Gender	Female; Male; Other (option to specify); Prefer not to say.	2021 UK Census
3 Sexual orientation	Bisexual; Gay or Lesbian; Queer; Straight/Heterosexual; Other (option to specify); Prefer not to say.	2021 UK Census
4 Nationality	British; English; Irish; Northern Irish; Scottish; Welsh; Other (option to specify); Prefer not to say.	2021 UK Census
5 Ethnicity	Asian or Asian British; Black, Black British, Caribbean or African; Mixed or multiple ethnic groups; White; Other ethnic group (option to specify); Prefer not to say.	2021 UK Census
6 Class	Working; Middle; Upper; Other (option to specify); None; Not sure; Prefer not to say.	Tilley & Evans (2017)
7 Educational attainment	No formal qualifications; 1-4 GCSEs or equivalent; 5 or more GCSEs or equivalent; Apprenticeship; 2 or more A-levels, HNC, HND, SVQ level 4 or equivalent; First or higher degree, professional qual, or other equivalent higher education qual; Other vocational / work related qual and non-UK / foreign qual (option to specify).	2021 UK Census
8 Employment	Employer of: 0-2; 2-9; 10+ employees. Manager: Manual; Semi-skilled; Expert. Supervisor: Manual; Semi-skilled; Expert. Worker: Manual; Semi-skilled; Expert. Unemployed; Other (option to specify); Prefer not to say.	Wright (1997)
9 Trade union membership	Yes; No; Not sure; N/A; Prefer not to say.	2021 UK Census
10 Asset ownership	Own home; Motor vehicle; Private pension; Stocks and/or shares; None; Prefer not to say.	Bespoke

*Demographic questionnaire*

Questionnaires captured participants' employment status, educational attainment, subjective class status, asset ownership, trade union membership, age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality. The first five factors relate directly to the research questions stated above. The latter five were included to ensure sensitivity to demographic factors outside the project's core focus. Most participants completed electronic questionnaires days before the interview took place. Some completed paper questionnaires immediately before the interview.

Response options were adapted from the sources summarised in Table 8. Most used categories adapted from the most recent wave of the UK census (2021). Employment status used Wright's (1997) labour market position matrix, which assessed participants' relation to the means of production (Employer, Manager, Supervisor, Worker) and level of technical proficiency (Manual, Semi-Skilled, Expert). Responses indicated that participants were substantially less female, marginally less white and less likely to be heterosexual, more likely to have attended university or joined a trade union, and about the same age as a typical political party member in the UK<sup>32</sup> (cf. Bale et al 2018, Burton & Tuncliffe 2022).

### **4.3 Analysis**

This section details the thematic (RQ1) and discursive (RQ2) analyses applied to the semi-structured interview transcripts. First, I describe the sensitizing concepts used in both analyses: discourse, materiality, structure and agency (Carpentier 2017). Second, I detail the thematic analysis procedure. Third, I describe the additional sensitizing used in the discourse analysis (Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

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<sup>32</sup> Reliable data on class, nationality, non-binary gender, and asset ownership were not available.

*Primary sensitizing concepts*

Scholars are ‘somewhat undecided—and perhaps rightly so—about the extent to which elit[ism] should be tied to material conditions and/or to symbolic orders of meaning’ (Thurlow & Jaworski 2017:250). My approach assumes that elitism—like most social phenomena—emerges from the ‘knotted’ interactions of discourse and materiality (Carpentier 2017:4). On this telling the elite is ‘a class ... with very high levels of economic affluence [alongside] distinctive social and cultural characteristics’ (Savage 2015:244). The four fundamentals of social reality identified by Carpentier (2017)—discourse, materiality, structure and agency—were thus the primary sensitizing concepts in my analysis of the images and interview transcripts generated by participants (Ritzer 1992).

**Table 9. Primary sensitizing concepts (RQ1, RQ2)**

Concept	Operational definition
<b>Discourse</b>	Meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects.
<b>Materiality</b>	Aspects of reality that precede the meanings assigned to them.
<b>Structure</b>	Non-agentic aspects of social reality that constrain and/or facilitate agency.
<b>Agency</b>	Identities and practices performed by agents.

Discourse denotes any and all ‘meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’ (Howarth & Stavarakakis 2000:6). Discursive aspects of elitism might include the processes of legitimation and distinction documented by Skeggs (1997) and Bourdieu (1984,

1991) that valorise elite status through oft-unspoken hierarchical social conventions. Materiality refers to those aspects of reality that precede the (discursive) meanings we assign to them. Material aspects of elitism thus include material resources like land, property and economic resources, particularly when these are distributed unevenly within a population (Block 2017). Carpentier defines agency as the thoughts and actions performed by individual or collective agents, and structure as any discursive and/or material system that constrains or facilitates agency. By attending to both the discursive and material aspects of the elite concept, my analysis combines the ‘essentialist/realist’ and ‘constructionist’ approaches to thematic analysis differentiated by Braun & Clarke (2006:14).

#### 4.3.1 Thematic analysis (RQ1)

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<b>RQ1</b>	How do Red Wall residents conceptualise the elite?	a. How did Red Wall residents construct the elite from words and images?
		b. Was the elite one or many?

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The images and interview transcripts generated by participants were subjected to Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six-phases of thematic analysis: (1) familiarisation, (2) generating codes<sup>33</sup>, (3) searching for, (4) reviewing and (5) defining themes, and (6) report production.

##### 1. Familiarisation.

I reviewed each interview in full at least four times as part of the thematic analysis process. After each interview had been completed, I listened to the full audio recording to ensure it was complete and noted initial ideas about the broad themes evoked during the interview.

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<sup>33</sup> Appendix 1 contains all codes and subthemes underlying the eight themes examined in Chapters 5-6.

These notes constituted the 'micro-analyses' recommended by Glynos & Howarth's (2007) guidelines for 'retroductive' analysis of qualitative data. These guided the iterative development of the interview schedule and conceptual framework during the data collection process, and the theoretical literature I sought out to help me conceptualise participant accounts.

Once all thirty-six interviews were complete, I listened to each interview again and created a full verbatim transcript of each interview. Transcripts included any non-verbal utterances or gestures I considered revealing of participants' views, such as laughter, pauses or outward signs of emotion. Once the transcripts were complete, I read each one in full and highlighted passages I judged salient to my research questions. I also engaged in repeated reading/listening of transcript excerpts and audio records throughout the analysis process, to assess the plausibility of the codes and themes generated (Terry et al 2017).

## 2. Generating codes.

Once interviews were transcribed, I generated an initial set of codes for each transcript. Codes provided brief descriptions of the contents of each passage in each transcript, and constituted the basic units of my analysis. They allowed me to group together content from different interview transcripts at a high level of granularity. Codes were isolated from the data and recorded in a spreadsheet.

I initially intended to present findings from each of the four participating political parties separately (Green, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Conservative). However, it became apparent during code generation that mereological judgements about the elite were generally split along partisan lines. With few exceptions Green and Labour members favoured monist and Conservatives and Liberal Democrats pluralist accounts of the elite. Chapter 5 therefore treats Green and Labour party members, and one professedly left-wing Liberal Democrat (LIB2), as

a single group ('left-wing participants'). Chapter 6 does the same for Conservatives and the remaining Liberal Democrats. Correlation between elite mereology and party membership was striking, but not absolute. I have endeavoured to highlight divergent responses in Chapters 5-7.

### 3. Searching for themes.

Once coding was complete I generated a set of candidate themes and sub-themes by considering continuities and distinctions between each code,. These were mostly drawn from the explicit or 'semantic' content of participant accounts, while the discourse analysis detailed below (RQ2) examined their 'latent or interpretative' content (Braun & Clarke 2006:13). All findings were cross referenced against demographic questionnaire responses to ensure demographic trends were captured.

### 4. Reviewing themes.

A systematic review of themes and sub-themes was then undertaken. I validated each theme against the transcripts and audio recordings to ensure plausibility. This process extended across individual interviews, political subgroups, and the complete dataset. I returned to the original audio recordings to capture the emotional tenor of key quotes, ensuring my analysis reflected not just what was said but also how it was expressed. Conservative and liberal accounts presented an interesting methodological challenge. Thematic analysis typically identifies commonalities between participants, but the heterogeneity of conservative/liberal responses instead suggested 'patterned distinctions.' Themes 6 ('Multivalence') and 7 ('Elusiveness') thus captured examples of systematic dissensus, rather than consensus, among conservatives and liberals.

## 5. Defining themes.

Once analytical saturation was reached, and I was satisfied tI had constructed a plausible analysis of the data, interview transcripts were re-coded according to the eight themes detailed in Table 10. Each theme was assigned a number, name, definition, and illustrative quote from participants accounts.

## 6. Report production.

Once I was satisfied with the list of themes I began writing-up my analysis. Report production was an active part of the thematic analysis process (Terry et al 2017), and the themes underwent many iterations during the writing process in response to further theoretical reading and feedback from supervisors. The final set of themes were: (1) The Bullingdon archetype, (2) Education, (3) Geography, (4) Villainy, (5) Agency, (6) Multivalence, (7) Elusiveness, and (8) Conspiracy. Themes 1-4 were principally inferred from left-wing accounts of the elite, and Themes 5-8 from conservative and liberal accounts. However, no theme was exclusive to one group or the other, and their association with left-wing or conservative/liberal accounts should be read as broad rather than categorical.



**Table 10. Themes inferred from thematic analysis**

Participants	No.	Theme	Illustrative quote
Left-wing	1	The Bullingdon archetype	'The British aristocracy is just a remarkably flexible and successful ... monopoly.' GRN5
	2	Education	'Not carbon copies but very much an Oxford way of doing things.' LAB17
	3	Geography	'That metropolitan elite has been sucking the life out of the rest of the country for some time' LAB2
	4	Villainy	'Monarchy is the root of all evil.' LAB15
Conservative/ liberal	5	Agency	'Agency and empowerment. That's the true nature of being an elite.' LIB1
	6	Multivalence	'I've given my interpretation of power as a source for good but also the evil as well with the cliques and cabals.' CON6
	7	Elusiveness	'Power is always one step above mine.' CON4
	8	Conspiracy	'It may be that there's six people just pulling the strings at the top saying this is what we want.' CON2

### 4.3.2 Discourse analysis (RQ2)

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<b>RQ2</b>	What are the implications for political thought?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. How did participants partition the elite from the people and the other?</li> <li>b. How did these partitions influence participants' political thought?</li> </ul>
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The thematic analysis detailed above focused on the explicit content of participant accounts. RQ2 sought to understand the political implications of the elite concepts constructed by participants, and so used modified version of poststructuralist discourse theory (Lalcau & Mouffe 1985) to explore the latent ‘assumptions, structures and/or meanings ... underpinning what is actually articulated in the data’ (Braun & Clarke 2006:13). Practical steps were similar to those undertaken by the thematic analysis listed above. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated how each discipline provides insight into elite concepts and their political implications. Elite theory foregrounds the implications that follow from the elite concept’s form—whether it is conceived as one or many. Discursive populism scholars place greater emphasis on the relations between the elite and other concepts (principally the people and the other).

These attributes are not entirely autonomous, as the relational capacities of any elite partly depend on whether they are conceived as one or many. My discourse analysis therefore synthesized both frameworks in a single approach that conceived elite conceptualisation as an act of folk mereology (Rose & Schaffer 2017) (Table 11). This approach was chosen to bring the political judgements participants made as they constructed the elite into sharper focus.

**Table 11. Secondary sensitizing concepts (RQ2)**

Literature	Concept	Operational definition	
Elite theory Mereology	<b>Monism</b>	Concentration of power at a single point.	
	<b>Pluralism</b>	Dispersal of power between multiple points.	
Populist Discourse	<b>Constitutive outside</b>	Part/whole relations between the elite, the people and the other.	
	<b>Part/whole relations</b>	Equivalence (=)	Affinity between concepts.
		Difference ( $\neq$ )	Distinction between concepts.
		Order ( $\leq$ )	Hierarchy between concepts.

Integrating folk mereology into PDT was relatively easy thanks to the mereological thinking already implicit to much of Laclau & Mouffe's work, which frequently argues that the objects of political discourse are constituted by the boundaries that distinguish them from others. For instance, on the defining of concepts, Laclau argues that:

All definitions presuppose a theoretical grid giving sense to what is defined. This sense ... can only be established on the basis of differentiating the defined term from something else that the definition excludes. This, in turn, presupposes a terrain within which those differences as such are *thinkable* (Laclau 2005b:1).

The sense of meaning thus encoded within PDT thus recalls Badiou's (2009: viii) procedure for identifying parts within wholes, captured in the phrase 'a being is *thinkable* only insofar as it

belongs to a world<sup>34</sup>.' In plain terms, the procedure locates the part, specifies its relations to other parts, and identifies the boundary of the whole to which the parts belong (see Chapter 1.3).

Laclau repeatedly affirmed that boundaries are fundamental to discursive meaning—every symbolic system needs to establish barriers to ensure coherence of meaning (Laclau 2005a:69-71). For Laclau & Mouffe, political space thus consists of 'a totality, and, within that totality, an interiority that can be divided into antagonistic camps' (Dikeç 2012:672). The partitions between the elite and its 'outsides' (the people and the other) are thus constitutive of the elite concept itself (Olivas-Osuna 2024). For RQ2a, my analysis thus reconstructed the discursive partitions participants used to situate the elite as a part within a broader whole. Following Laclau and Badiou, these were assumed to entail three discursive operations.

First, I examined participants' statements about the elite's mereological form. That is, the degree to which participants conceived elite power as concentrated at a single point (monist) or dispersed between multiple points. Participant accounts of the elite were multifaceted, and no participant spoke purely of the elite concepts' monist or pluralist characteristics. My analysis tries to do justice to this complexity by conceiving monism and pluralism as a continuum rather than a binary distinction. Second, I examined the relations the elite were said to share with other parts of the social whole. I particularly looked for relations that enjoined the elite to its 'constitutive outsides' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985)—the people and the other (Sabsay 2019:1; Chapter 3).

The people corresponded to the collective identities held by participants, such as 'Brit,' 'Englishman,' 'Northerner,' 'European' and 'working class.' The other was mostly represented

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<sup>34</sup> Badiou (2009:59) gives the following technical explanation: 'the exposition ... proceed[s] through three successive moments. The first forces upon thought the existence ... of a minimum. The second fixes the laws relative to the conjunction of two beings-there. Finally, the third posits the existence of an envelope for every region of the world.'

by immigrant populations from outside of Britain. Third, I analysed the boundaries participants constructed around that whole. These corresponded to the macro frame in which participants situated their accounts. These were typically regional ('the North'), national ('Britain' or sometimes 'England') or supranational ('the world'), and so tended to accord with Westphalian assumptions that political to the boundaries of territorial nation states (Fraser 2005). My analysis assumed that these boundary judgements corresponded to participants' sense of who among the elite, people and other 'counted' as full political subjects (Fraser 2010:281).

RQ2b examined the role of the elite concept in participants' broader political thought. This analysis drew on Freeden's (1994:141, 2013) morphological theory of ideology. For Freeden, political worldviews constitute a 'meeting point between meaning and form' determined by 'the shifting proximities and relative weights' accorded to 'systems of concepts.' These systems are essential to political thought, as they (partially) fix the meanings of essentially contested ideas (like 'the elite') through structural relationships to other concepts. Freeden distinguished three levels in any given ideology. 'Components' are the ineliminable and contingent features of 'concepts' which can be aggregated together to form 'ideologies.'

To grasp how a particular concept (like 'the elite') 'behaves' within a participant's worldview (Freeden 1994:141), it is therefore necessary to understand whether the elite constitutes a unitary, monist concept or a plural set of components, and how it is situated with respect to other concepts. These considerations are linked, because singular and multiple concepts have distinct relational capacities. Singular concepts can, for instance, form straightforward binary oppositions with other singular concepts, while multiplicities cannot (Law 2002, Bar-El 2021).

Actually-existing worldviews are, of course, highly complex, and it is functionally impossible to innumerate every conceptual relation that imbues any given concept with meaning—hence my focus on the 'family' of concepts composed of the elite, the people and the other (Freeden

1994:143). The relations that bound this family together took three main forms in participant accounts: equivalence, difference, and order (see Table 11). Equivalence and difference are core PDT concepts used here to describe the affinities and distinctions participants constructed between the elite, people and other. Order relations represent a particular kind of hierarchical difference between elements situated at different points on some scale of comparison (Badiou 2014:171-182).

In this study, the scale of comparison was mereological—whether the elite, people and other were conceived as concepts in their own right, or as disjoint sub-conceptual components. That is, whether participants situated these concepts at the second or third level of Freeden's theory of ideology. Order relations are not typically invoked by PDT, but are necessary here to show how the elite theory/mereology concepts of monism and pluralism complexify the relational sense of meaning core to discursive populism studies. By tracing relations between 'nodal points' (e.g. the elite, the people), the field implicitly assumes that these 'points' represent singular 'nodes' within a larger discursive formation. However, the history of elite theory outlined in Chapter 2 suggests that the elite concept can be singular (monist) or plural, and that these forms carry important political implications. As relations between monads and pluralities are inherently hierarchical, the non-hierarchical relations of 'equivalence' and 'difference' conventional to Laclauian discourse analysis are insufficient to describe the relations between elite, people and other when viewed through an elite theory lens.

Order relations thus allow my analysis to do more than combine folk mereology and discourse theory in a merely additive sense. Rather, they facilitate a novel, mutually-enriching interaction between the two frameworks which casts new light on how the elite is inserted into political discourse. Once inferred, the part/whole relations between elite, people and other favoured by left-wing, conservative and liberal participants were approximated in three diagrams (see Figure 17, Chapter 7.2). Each was then used as a visual sensitizing concept in my analysis of the elite concept's role in participants' political thought, inferred from

participant responses during the politics stage of the interview. I examined the vertical (populist-elitist) and horizontal (left-right) dimensions of political thought (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017).

For the vertical dimension, participants were asked to share their recollections of the notionally populist 2016 Brexit referendum. Brexit was an ideal case study for this thesis, as the referendum question (and the discourses around it) framed Britain as a nested set of part/whole relations (Badiou 2009:68). Anti-elite and nativist rhetorics (Iakhnis *et al* 2018) rendered elite/people and people/other relations highly salient in Brexit discourse (Koller *et al* 2019). Moreover, the referendum question – 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?' – prompted voters to draw a national or supranational border around the totality constituted by the elite and the people. Brexit can itself, then, be considered a mass exercise in folk mereology (see Chapter 1.3).

The fitful left/right alignment of Brexit discourse—particularly in the Red Wall (see Chapter 1.2)—also promised to shed light on the horizontal dimension of political thought. Participants were here asked whether and how they would change Britain's elite configuration if they were given the chance. Many interpreted this question in terms of the 'problem of distribution' examined by Zannoni (1978), which concerns whether and how resources should be allocated in a just society. Responses were revealing of participants' favoured notions of social justice. I interpreted their responses through works by Bobbio (1994) and Fraser (2005) chosen to address themes identified through micro-analyses of early interviews.

Bobbio (1994) argues that the distinction between 'distributive' and 'retributive' justice constitutes the essence of the left/right political spectrum. The former seeks to raise equality by moving wellbeing of social agents closer to the mean average of society as a whole. Fraser distinguishes 'affirmative' distribution that upholds existing power relations from 'transformative' distribution that seeks to challenge them. Fraser's work was also vital to my

analysis of participant recollections of Brexit. Her concept of the 'Keynesian-Westphalian frame' (Fraser 2007:273) describes how otherised groups are denied political subjecthood when the public sphere is assumed to be co-extensive with the borders of territorial nation states. The concept has been applied in research on the Brexit referendum (Milstein 2024), which essentially asked voters to indicate whether the Westphalian frame should be upheld or expanded.

#### **4.4 Reflexivity & positionality**

##### *4.4.1 Reflexivity*

Poststructuralist discourse analysis is an explicitly reflexive methodology. Howarth & Stavarakakis (2000:6) explain that '[i]nstead of applying a pre-existing theory to a set of empirical objects [..t]he concepts used by discourse theorists must be sufficiently open and flexible to be adapted, deformed and transformed in the process of application.' Glynos & Howarth (2007) likewise encourage PDT researchers to adopt a 'retroductive' (as opposed to inductive or deductive) stance toward their data, where the researcher seeks out theoretical literature during the analysis process to aid their interpretations. Carpentier (2017:15) deems this approach one of 'cyclical iteration' that allows data and theoretical frameworks to 'talk' to each other. In this spirit, a series of 'microanalyses' were conducted during the data collection period (Briggs 1986) to flag putative themes inferred from participant accounts of the elite. Theoretical literature was then sought out to conceptualise these themes, some of which then became a part of the conceptual framework detailed above. This ensured my analysis entailed a conversation between data and theory, rather than the imposition of *a priori* categories on participant accounts. This retroductive approach shaped my analysis in three main ways.



First, Mouffe's tripartite model of politics was introduced to the conceptual framework to aid interpretation of responses to the 'comparison' stage of the interview. Participants were asked to compare Britain's contemporary elite to previous incarnations, and to elites in other countries. However, many participants took these questions as cues to compare the elite to non-elite groups, which I typically interpreted as 'the people' and/or 'the other.' Moreover these comparisons often recurred during the 'politics' stage of the interview, particularly when participants were asked whether their notions of the elite influenced their decision to vote in the 2016 Brexit referendum. I initially interpreted these non-elite comparisons as digressions, and tried to steer participants back to the elite. However, as data collection proceeded, I began to think of them as important insights into participant conceptions of the elite. Specifically, whether they considered the people or the other to be the elite's 'constitutive outside' (see Chapter 3.3).

Second, the hierarchical relations that some participants constructed between elite, people and other prompted me to introduce the notion of a discursive 'order relation' alongside the standard PDT categories of equivalence and difference. Order relations are not commonly used in PDT research but are fundamental to mathematics (specifically order theory) and have been applied in a social theory context by Badiou (2009, 2014). PDT and mathematics are more mutually compatible than they appear at first sight as both fundamentally attempt to describe relations between abstract elements<sup>35</sup>. In mathematics, orders ( $x \leq 1$ ) differ from equivalences ( $x = 1$ ) and differences ( $x \neq 1$ ) in several ways. Crucial for my analysis, orders ascribe a fixed hierarchy to a set of differentiated elements. Orders are, then, a specific type of non-substitutable difference relation. For instance, the elements in the order  $x \leq 1$  cannot change places without altering their meanings ( $1 \leq x$ ) because ' $\leq$ ' implies a hierarchy wherein  $x$  cannot be greater than 1. However the equivalential relation  $x = 1$  can be re-arranged without any change of meaning ( $1 = x$ ). Equivalent elements are therefore substitutable while ordered

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<sup>35</sup> Sciamarella's (2020) *A Topological Reading of Ernesto Laclau* provides a comprehensive account of the 'analogical correspondences' between PDT and mathematics.

elements are not. This distinction—and its logical consequences—helped me conceptualise the relations between the elite, the people and the other in participant accounts.

Third, my theoretical reading on monism and pluralism led me to the study of part-whole relations known as mereology, and to Rose & Schaffer's (2017) concept of folk mereology (see Chapter 1.3). This reading prompted the realisation each of the component parts of my conceptual framework – drawn from discourse theory, elite theory, and populism studies – could be expressed in the language of parts and wholes. By framing elite construction as an example of folk mereology, I allowed these previously distinct concepts to speak to each other in a shared mereological vocabulary. Mereology's mathematical component also allowed me to think the elite concepts constructed by participants in terms of their spatial logics. This recalls the 'architectonic' approach to discourse analysis which infers the structure of discursive formations from spatial metaphor (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017). My analysis thus brings PDT into contact with the mathematical turns taken by assemblage (DeLanda 2006), actor network (Law 2002) and set theoretic social theory in recent years (Badiou 2014). Each of these theoretical movements assumes that 'as human beings begin to think in abstractions, they do so not just linguistically but mathematically' (Lash 2012:263).

#### *4.4.2 Positionality*

Social scientific research requires that researchers account for the influence on their own positionality on their data. This is especially necessary in discursive research on elitism. I have argued that the elite is a recursive concept that draws its meaning from its position in a broader social whole, of which I am also a part. Thurlow & Jaworski (2017) thus advocate that elite researchers maintain a critical reflexivity, as 'scholars or not, we are all of us positioned by elitist discourses and targets for the rhetorics of distinction, exclusivity and prestige that underpin elitist ideologies.' Moreover, PDT insists that 'the discourse analyst is always located in a particular historical and political context with no neutral Archimedean point from which

to describe, argue and evaluate' (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000:7). My own social position was therefore an irrevocable part of the interview process and my analysis of participant accounts. I was aware of four interactions between my positionality and the work undertaken by this thesis.

First, I was born and raised in Liverpool in the North West of England, adjacent to the Red Wall region. Participants made several, mostly humorous references to an underdog/overdog relation between the North and the South and may have been more comfortable making these comments given my own status as a 'Northerner.' Second, prior working relationships with people from some of the elite groups named by participants may have coloured my interpretations. Before beginning the PhD, I worked for eight years at a large medical charity in Central London that regularly sent a delegation to the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos. The WEF was named as an elite power centre by several participants. Moreover a disproportionate number of my colleagues were alumni of the Universities of Oxford or Cambridge, which were also cited as sites of elite concentration by participants. One colleague once bashfully admitted that were a member of The Athenaeum – an elite private members' club sufficiently well-known to serve as the site of the (fictional) establishment plot depicted in Chris Mullin's 1982 novel *A Very British Coup*.

Third, participants sometimes remarked that my position as an academic researcher was a marker of elitism. These comments were mostly humorous, but occasionally pointed. Moreover, participants tended to assume – correctly – that I held broadly left-wing political views. It is thus possible that conservative/liberal participants may have moderated their interview response, although I was never explicitly aware of this. Well-founded assumptions about my political orientation may also have contributed to the relative difficulty I experienced trying to recruit Conservatives to the project, discussed above. Fourth, my demographic profile as a white male may also have played a role in the recruitment of disproportionately few female and non-white participants. Non-white respondents were more

likely than white respondents to drop out of the study after initial contact had been made, such that only two of thirty-six participants held non-white racial identities.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

The methodology described in this chapter allowed me to examine the elite concepts constructed by participants (RQ1) and their political implications (RQ2). My analysis is detailed in the remaining chapters of this thesis. Chapter 5 analyses the accounts of left-wing participants, who consistently described a monist elite made up of aristocrats and oligarchs. Chapter 6 analyses the accounts of conservative and liberal participants, who gave much more heterogenous accounts of a broadly pluralist elite dispersed across multiple power centres including politics, business, the media, technology, academia, the military, philanthropy, professional sport, and celebrity. Chapter 7 traces the relations participants constructed between elite, people and other, and their implications for political thought.

## Chapter 5. Constructing the elite: left-wing accounts

### 5.1 Introduction

Chapters 5 and 6 address the first research question posed by this thesis— how do Red Wall residents conceptualise the elite (RQ1)? This chapter focuses on twenty-four Red Wall residents who identified as politically left-wing. These participants gave strikingly consistent accounts of a British 'establishment' (Smith 2024) made up of two main subgroups. The first was a hereditary aristocracy of 'old money' families said to control Britain's elite universities, media, Conservative party and public school system<sup>36</sup>. The second a partly distinct, somewhat transnational oligarchy of bankers, city traders and businesspeople. The aristocracy was said to hold a monopoly over every significant source of power in British society, while the oligarchs controlled the primary source – economic wealth.

I inferred four themes from these accounts. First, participants consistently evoked what I came to call the Bullingdon archetype—a stylized notion of the British establishment exemplified by the well-known image of former British Prime Ministers David Cameron and Boris Johnson as members of a private dining club based at Oxford University ('The Bullingdon Club'). A quarter of left-wing participants presented this image during the image task. Second, participants placed great emphasis on a specifically educational form of inequality, said to be the primary means by which Britain's hereditary elite reproduced itself from generation to generation. Third, participants alleged that power in British society was localised to particular geographic areas in the South over the North, cities over town and country, and London over everywhere else. Finally, left-wing participants almost-invariably cast the elite as the villainous antagonists of British politics. The only partial exceptions came from those who identified themselves or their families as elite or 'privileged' in some way.

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<sup>36</sup> UK 'public' schools are privately-owned academies long-associated with the British elite (Walford 1986:183).

Personal links to elitism appeared to moderate normative assessments of the elite, possibly as a means of sating cognitive dissonance or pre-empting accusations of hypocrisy.

The chapter consists of four main sections. First, I list the images that participants presented during the elite image task. Table 12 groups these images by theme using the three components said to be present in 'all' elite concepts by Zannoni (1978:11): (i) the *domain* where elite power is exercised, (ii) the source of elite *power*, and (iii) the *distinction* between elites and non-elites. Verbal presentations appear 'in quotation marks.' Multiple images presented by the same participant appear on separate rows. Second, drawing on verbatim excerpts from our conversations, I explore how the four themes noted above manifest in participant accounts: The Bullington archetype, education, geography, and villainy. Third, I examine the mereological forms participants attributed to the elite. That is, whether they tended to construct the elite as a coherent whole or a disjoint set of parts. Mereological judgements were mostly inferred from the spatial metaphors participants used to situate the elite within their mental maps of society. Finally, a discussion section reads participant accounts through the literatures reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 and considers their discursive and political implications.

I conclude that left-wing accounts reproduced a tension, discussed in Chapter 2.2, between calls for a nuanced, granular, *sociological* account of the elite, and a definitive *political* account capable of mobilising popular sentiments against the emergent plutocracies documented by twenty-first century elite theory. Given that left-wing participants consistently constructed more definitive elites than did conservatives or liberals, the relative absence of left-wing populism in recent British history (Dean 2020) poses a challenge to Du Gay's (2008:80) work on Keyser Sütze elites, where inexact concepts are said to obscure elites in the public imagination and thereby constrain anti-elite politics. It may be that elite concepts can also be too precise to serve a political function. If the left's notion of the elite is unable to 'float' between distinct meanings, left-wing populism may confine itself to those who already share their political aims. Rather than mobilising the people, this narrow form of anti-elite discourse may be closer to singing to the choir.

**Table 12. Images presented by left-wing participants**

Alias	Image(s)	Distinction	Power	Domain
GRN2	The Bullingdon Club	Heredity	Monopoly	Any/all
GRN4	The Bullingdon Club	Education	Monopoly	Any/all
GRN5	The Bullingdon Club	Fame	Monopoly	Any/all
LAB2	The Bullingdon Club	Education	Monopoly	Any/all
LAB9	The Bullingdon Club	Education	Monopoly	Any/all
LAB7	The Bullingdon Club	Heredity	Monopoly	Any/all
	Snowflake liberal elite headline	Capital (symbolic)	Hegemonic	Culture
LAB3	Brideshead Revisited	Capital (symbolic)	Monopoly	Any/all
LAB5	Eton College students	Education	Networked	Any/all
LAB6	'Family, money'	Heredity	Networked	Any/all
LAB11	Sunak & Johnson	Heredity	Networked	Any/all
LAB12	Jacob Rees-Mogg	Heredity	Monopoly	Any/all
	Prince Harry			
LAB15	Boris Johnson & Queen Elizabeth II	Heredity	Monopoly	Any/all
	Historic House			

Alias	Image(s)	Distinction	Power	Domain
LAB17	Oxford University graduates	Heredity	Networked	Any/all
LIB2	Toffs & Toughs	Class	Domination	Economy
LAB1	Dollar bills	Capital (economic)	Material	Economy
LAB10	Bloomberg Billionaire Index	Capital (economic)	Material	Economy
LAB13	Graph: UK household income	Capital (economic)	Material	Economy
LAB14	Bankers at boardroom table	Capital (economic)	Material	Economy
GRN1	'The rich, the Labour/Conservative duopoly'	Capital (economic)	Material	Economy; Politics
LAB4	Mobutu, Ali & the people	Capital (symbolic)	Hegemonic	Any/all
LAB16	<i>A Clockwork Orange</i>	Class	Coercive	Any/all
LAB18	The elite vs real life	Class	Coercive	Any/all
LAB8	South East England (map)	Location	Uneven development	Geography
GRN3	'The rich, politicians, the press, royalty, the Church of England.'	Merit	Dispersed inequality	Various



## 5.2 Constructing the elite (RQ1a)

The twenty-four left-wing participants interviewed for this thesis gave a strikingly cohesive account of the British<sup>37</sup> elite. The central archetype of that account was an aristocratic establishment of wealthy families who were said to hold a monopoly over the country's elite education institutions and Conservative party. Table 12 demonstrates that fourteen of twenty-four images presented by left-wing participants depicted some kind of aristocracy whose power was said to derive from hereditary and economic privileges with deep roots in Britain's history. Each of these images contained actual or fictional alumni of the British public school system and/or the University of Oxford, suggesting that educational inequality was a key part of the elite imaginary shared by left-wing participants.

Of the remaining participants, most described a separate 'new money' form of elite felt to have emerged in recent decades. However, in most cases, left-wing participants believed that the British establishment had absorbed new elites without difficulty, by recruiting them into the same cultural and educational institutions that had long sustained the British aristocracy. Once the image task was over, participants were asked to substantiate their account of the British elite by answering a series of follow-up questions (see Chapter 4.2). Most described an aristocratic elite that recalled scholarly accounts of the British establishment (Friedman & Reeves 2024), wherein symbols and institutions from previous eras persist into the present day, and imbricate kinship with capital in the popular imagination (Smith 2024). Table 13 contains four themes that I inferred from our conversations.

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<sup>37</sup> Note on nationality: participants were asked about the elite as it exists in 'contemporary British society.' Throughout Chapters 5-7, it is thus assumed that participant allusions to nation and nationality referred to Britain. Where participants specifically referred to other national and regional identities, including English, Northern Irish, Scottish, Welsh and/or 'Northerner,' this is so stated.

**Table 13. Themes inferred from left-wing accounts**

No.	Theme	Illustrative quote
1	The Bullingdon archetype	The British aristocracy is just a remarkably flexible and successful ... monopoly. GRN5
2	Education	Not carbon copies but very much an Oxford way of doing things. LAB17
3	Geography	That metropolitan elite has been sucking the life out of the rest of the country for some time. LAB2
4	Villainy	Monarchy is the root of all evil. LAB15

This section uses verbatim quotes from participant interviews to develop each theme in detail. Theme 1 (The Bullingdon archetype) demonstrates how participants elaborated on the Bullingdon Club archetype that dominated the image elicitation task. Bullingdon elites were said to draw their power from an imbrication of, and their capacity to absorb newer forms of 'new money' and/or 'liberal metropolitan' elite. Theme 2 (Education) examines the surprising emphasis left-wing participants placed on elite educational pathways. That attendance at prestigious public schools and universities were seen as core markers of elitism may reveal something about participants' own class identities, as educational inequality was mostly invoked by participants who had themselves attended university. Theme 3 (Geography) reviews the various geographic concentrations of power noted by participants, which were said to favour the South over the North, the cities over the towns, and London over everywhere else. Finally, Theme 4 describes the antagonistic stance that most left-wing participants took towards the elite, and the moderating effects of family background and gender norms.

### 5.2.1 *The Bullingdon archetype: 'a remarkably flexible ... monopoly'*

The elite that emerged from left-wing accounts drew together a familiar set of archetypes associated with the British establishment. These included hereditary privilege, political power, wealth, posh accents, fine clothing, elite education, boarding school, classical architecture, whiteness and patriarchy. All these elements were present in *The Bullingdon Club* (Figure 7) – a black and white photograph taken in 1987, which was presented by a quarter of six left-wing participants during the image task– fully one quarter of left-wing image presentations. The photograph depicts ten smartly dressed white men stood in formation on a stone staircase. They are all members of a private, all-male dining club domiciled at the University of Oxford. Two are future British Prime Ministers – David Cameron (back row, second from left) and Boris Johnson (seated, right).

**Figure 7. The Bullingdon Club<sup>38</sup>**

GRN2, GRN4, GRN5, LAB2, LAB7, LAB9



<sup>38</sup> Permission to publish the original *Bullingdon Club* photograph was withdrawn by the rights holders in 2007. With permission, Figure 6 contains Rona Marsden's *Class of '87* an oil-on-canvas reproduction commissioned by the BBC. Participants invariably presented the original image, which can easily be found online.

*The Bullingdon Club* was the only image presented by multiple participants. A further eight elite images also depicted elite academic institutions. Together with the six Bullingdon images, this meant that three fifths of left-wing participants presented images of actual or fictional alumni of Oxford University and/or Eton College. Eton is an elite public school that has educated 'more than a third of Britain's 57 prime ministers over its 583 years' including both Cameron and Johnson (The Economist 2023).

Allusions to 'social elites who attend Eton College and Harrow' were also made by participants who did not present *The Bullingdon Club* image (LAB8). LAB15 argued that the British aristocracy had, through the imbrication of heredity, wealth and power, acquired a monopoly over both the elected and unelected forms of power in British society. Referring to the image of then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson meeting the late Queen Elizabeth II she had presented during the image task, she surmised:

It's the two big elites in this country in one picture. The unelected elite on the right, and on the left the elected elite that has actually come from the same elite. .... The public school system and the landed gentry are unelected to get where they've got until he's finally elected to office. LAB15

LAB15's subsumption of Britain's 'two big elites' within the same British establishment was indicative of a strong monist streak in many left-wing accounts (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.3). Participants claimed to derive their notions of the establishment from a combination of media representations and personal experiences of people and institutions resembling the Bullingdon archetype, which were invariably held in very low regard. LAB11, a woman in her early seventies who associated elitism with uneven class structures, noted that fictionalised television programmes 'like *Downton Abbey* and *Upstairs Downstairs*' provided 'windows into the lives of the elite' that had shaped her perceptions of the British establishment.

Press reports of Bullingdon members vandalising restaurants with impunity (e.g. Sherwood 2019) were cited as metaphors for irresponsible elite stewardship of British society. GRN5 shared a story told to her by her mother, about the 'shameful' behaviour she had witnessed while working for a 'not-quite-elite family' associated with a well-known car manufacturing firm: 'she told me about the parties they had. The blokes would go off in their sports cars and they'd have a competition who could bring back the most public telephone receivers. That was fun for them.' GRN5 continued:

The idea of wealthy people just vandalising public telephone boxes. You never know what emergency a person wasn't able to call about because an idiot had done that. And I've heard the thing about the Bullingdon club burning fifty-pound notes in front of homeless people and you know. GRN5

Left-wing participants shared many similar anecdotes about elite figures somehow abusing public goods and services, implying that the establishment were actively harmful to civility in British society.

A rare exception was LAB3, a male in his early thirties living abroad at the time of our conversation. Although he considered aristocratic wealth fundamentally unjust, he appeared to draw humorous enjoyment from the screen adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited* he presented during the image task:

It's an iconic book. An iconic film. It was a series and then a film right? And for me this is the picture of the elite. Landowning, old money, and possibly a bit

gay (laughs). ... There has to be a teddy bear<sup>39</sup> also, no teddy bear you're not elite  
(laughs). LAB3

The aristocracy was thus emblematic of a performative British aesthetic LAB3 was keen to retain an ironic connection to as a gay British resident of a foreign country. Indeed the *Brideshead* still was the only image of fictional aristocrats presented by participants, which may have separated the aristocratic aesthetic from the real, breathing aristocracy posited by images of the Bullingdon Club and British monarchy. It may also have been significant that LAB3 was the only left-wing participant who had previously been a member of the Conservative party (during what they termed their 'one year of stupidity'). Chapter 6 details how conservative participants were more likely to feel a sense of national pride about the aesthetics and institutions of British power.

Figure 8 contains a further five images presented by left-wing participants which sought to capture this aristocratic aesthetic. Each contains some allusion to deep history, or, more correctly, the persistence of historic symbols and institutions in contemporary British life. For instance, *The Bullingdon Club* photograph was taken long after the commercialisation of colour photography in 1987. The image's black-and-white hue was then a stylistic choice, that seemed to evoke Bullingdon families' historical ties to Britain's feudal aristocracy in participant accounts. Although these images were intended to evoke a sense of history, only one was created before the 1980s. LIB2 presented a black and white photograph of finely dressed public schoolboys taken in 1937 popularly known as 'Toffs & Toughs' (see Figure 18). However, LIB2 explained at the outset that 'this image was taken in 1937 the year of my birth. And it's still true today. Maybe it's even truer today.' Even here, then, the participant had chosen an image

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<sup>39</sup> A reference to Aloysius, the teddy bear owned by *Brideshead Revisited's* Lord Sebastian Flyte. Aloysius was modelled on Archie – an actual teddy bear owned by British Poet Laureate John Betjeman, befriended by Waugh during their time at Oxford University in the 1920s (Gowers 2009).

from within his own lifetime, and stressed that the historical institutions depicted persisted, or had maybe even intensified, in contemporary British life.

**Figure 8. The establishment**



These images appeared to have been chosen to evoke many forms of elitism in a single image – be they hereditary, financial, political, educational or cultural. This ‘all in one’ elite concept stood in stark contrast to those held by conservatives and liberals (see Chapter 6.2) whose images tended to depict a particular form of elite power. Asked why she had chosen to present *The Bullingdon Club*, GRN5 surmised that ‘the British aristocracy is just a remarkably flexible and successful creature. And they have got a real monopoly haven’t they. Because they’ve got so much power over private schools and dominate public life, politics, business and law and

the media.’ As well as their apparent monopoly over any-and-all sources of power in British society, GRN5’s summary captured two other core characteristics of the British establishment imagined by left-wing participants. Their longevity, which derived from an apparent capacity to retain power in the face of sometimes radical historical change; and their flexibility, attributed to their capacity to change with the times and, in the process, absorb new elites that emerge from time to time and might otherwise threaten the establishment’s position at the apex of British society.

The British establishment was thus said to have endured many historical epochs unscathed. From civil war to the industrial revolution, two world wars, post-imperial decline, neoliberalism and Brexit, the supremacy of the British establishment was said to be practically the only constant in British cultural and political history. Classical architecture was a recurrent motif in images of the aristocracy, likely because it provided a visual allusion to historic ways of life that persist into the present day. Imposing architecture could be seen in *the Bullingdon Club*, the cover of *Historic House* magazine (Fig 8b), the still from a screen adaptation of Evelyn Waugh’s (1945) *Brideshead Revisited*<sup>40</sup> (Fig 8c) and the contemporary Eton College students presented by LAB5 (Fig 8a). LAB3 explained that they had acquired ‘a very specific idea of what elite means’ having written a thesis on ‘country house literature.’ Ownership of historic property and, more importantly, the land on which it stood, was often said to be a defining characteristic of the British establishment, and left-wing participants made frequent references to ‘landed gentry.’

Land was thus understood as a special kind of asset that trumped all others. LAB3 argued that land ownership was particularly valuable not just for its monetary worth, but because it

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<sup>40</sup> Cameron’s (2019:63) memoir describes his Bullingdon Club tenure as ‘the years after the ITV adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited* when quite a few of us were carried away by the fantasy of an Evelyn Waugh-like Oxford existence.’



allowed aristocratic elites to operate according to a different timescale to 'mere' political power, and therefore to take long-term strategic decisions inaccessible to others:

I had a talk with the bursar when I was at Cambridge. They explained the financial situation of the college which was absolutely fine, and they said we have all this land with coal underneath it, and we've held it for hundreds of years. And someone asked them well why don't you exploit it? And he said no no no we're playing the long game. And that's it, they're playing a game that lasts centuries rather than just one election cycle. LAB3

LAB3 thus felt that the visible, official signs of power such as parliament and political office were in some sense illusory. They argued that this illusion persisted because it drew public opprobrium away from the 'the landowning elite.'

The fact that people think the political elite are sitting in the House of Commons is something that the landowning elite would like to happen. Let's move the attention away from us, and put it somewhere else, on a short-term basis. LAB3

Days after their interview had concluded, LAB3 e-mailed through a link to a website<sup>41</sup> containing information on land ownership in England, noting in their accompanying e-mail that the site 'might be useful and/or give some clarity to what I was talking about.' Articles on the site include 'The Villages Where Feudalism Never Died' and 'Revealed: the Aristocrats and City Bankers who own England's Grouse Moors,' which lamented the persistence of aristocratic land ownership in large swathes of contemporary England.

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<sup>41</sup> <https://whoownsengland.org> is a companion site to the book of the same name by Shrubsole (2019).

Outside of the Bullingdon archetype, the most commonly cited elites were those who derived their power from material wealth (Figure 9) but did not exhibit the additional hereditary, historical and cultural markers of establishment power associated with the aristocracy. The economic elites described by participants came in two main varieties – a ‘transnational’ financial elite, and a specifically British ‘new money’ elite said to have emerged in the years following the Conservative Thatcher governments between 1979 and 1990. As with the Bullingdon Club, which implicated former Conservative prime ministers Cameron and Johnson, the ‘Thatcherite’ elite archetype was also strongly associated with the Conservative party. Left-wing participants thus constructed a politicised conception of the elite explicitly associated with their political opponents.

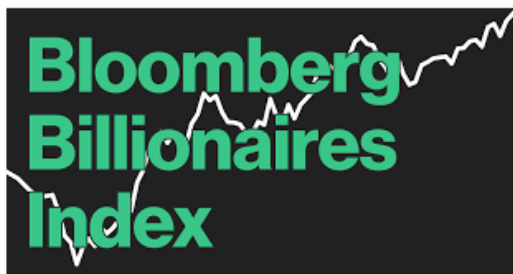
**Figure 9. The economic elite**



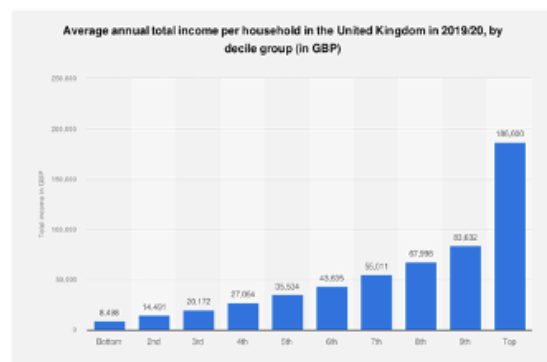
a. Boardroom  
LAB14



b. Dollar bills  
LAB1



c. Bloomberg Billionaire Index  
LAB1



d. UK income deciles  
LAB13

However, left-wing participants did not tend to frame entrepreneurial elites as competitors to the establishment. On the contrary, they were either felt to be allies or subordinates of the Bullingdon aristocracy. Indeed, the capacity of the Bullingdon establishment to absorb emergent elite class fractures from inside or outside Britain was said to be a key source of their power. LAB13, a man in his late thirties, told how they had gradually attained a management position within the financial services industry despite not having attended university. He contrasted his own gradual career trajectory to those he had apparently witnessed first-hand among those with pre-existing social ties to the British establishment:

It's literally a social group of people, which I experience in the financial sector  
orgs I worked for. It was always the same people from the same schools [and]  
industries. They very rarely bring people up into the top tier. And even if they  
did there was a glass ceiling for them. LAB13

LAB13 thus alleged that the British establishment was largely closed off to recruitment from outside, and that this hermetic seal was a result of explicitly 'social' ties among the alumni of a select set of elite 'schools,' universities and industries, rather than merit. On the rare occasions when outsiders did manage to make in-roads into the elite, this same social group apparently ensured that a 'glass ceiling' impeded non-elites from rising as far as their talents might otherwise have taken them. For me, this visual metaphor implied that distinctions between elites and non-elites persisted despite any upward mobility from non-elite strata. That is, that the structure of power in British society meant that one's origins remained determinant of life chances even if particular individuals managed, with great difficulty, to move upwards in the social hierarchy.

Similar sentiments were expressed by LAB10, a man in his early twenties who presented an image of the Bloomberg Billionaire Index (Fig 3c) to represent economic power during the image task, rather than the Bullingdon archetype. Nonetheless, they contended that old

money elites retained the final say on whether 'new money' outsiders were admitted to the British establishment. Drawing on F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1922 novel *The Great Gatsby*, LAB10 argued that:

No matter how many parties he throws or how many rich people he tries to mingle with he knows he's never accepted as New England elite because he's new money. They'll still go to his parties so they'll work together if they think it benefits them but he's new money and they're old money ... the book was written in the 1920s when the author married into wealth. He was drawing from personal experience. LAB10

This hierarchy of powers, wherein the aristocracy were felt to be the ultimate arbiters of elite status in the last instance, was evident in several other interviews with left-wing participants. For instance LAB6, whose own grandparents had worked as 'hired help' for aristocratic families with 'inherited wealth and very respectable professions' argued that 'people who have recently made money might have gone to Oxbridge but they will never be allowed into the real elite who inherit wealth.' The British aristocracy were thus said to constitute 'an elite who will never not be elite. They are unshakably elite.'

These statements by LAB10 and LAB6 implied that specifically aristocratic power was not just historical but, in some sense, *transhistorical*. As such, the aristocracy was felt to be such a fixture of British public life as to be assumed permanent. Participants often struggled to pinpoint the beginnings of the British aristocracy beyond vague allusions to 'feudalism' (GRN2, LAB9). LAB11 thus felt that the British aristocracy was 'as old as the hills' and likely to absorb any would-be competitor elite that might emerge from contemporary forms of networked or capitalistic power. Indeed the Bullingdon and Thatcherite archetypes were sometimes conflated, as when LAB15 described 'old Etonians going off making millions in

bonuses from the city.' LAB3 concurred that all elite domains are populated by the same 'class' of people:

If they weren't in parliament they'd be leading a bank. If they weren't in a bank they'd be leading a big multinational. They just happen to be people in leadership positions. LAB3

LAB3 thus argued that elitism, once attained, allowed individuals to trade various forms of economic and social capital, and thus to move between social domains without ever losing their elite status. Over the long-run, this had produced an elite constellation that combined elements of each social scientific synonyms for the elite concept discussed in Chapter 2.2. That is, an aristocratic oligarchy, ruling class and political class rolled into one, that was simultaneously few, distinct, cohesive, conscious of its elite status and powerful in both a general and a political sense (Zannoni 1978).

### *5.2.2 Educational inequality: 'an Oxford way of doing things'*

Images of the Bullingdon archetype seemed designed to evoke many forms of elitism at once. This intention was sometimes made explicit. LAB12, a man in his early sixties, noted that he had presented an image of a wealthy, privately-educated, dynastic Conservative MP (Jacob Rees-Mogg) reclining across the instantly recognisable pews of the British House of Commons precisely because the 'fires off a load of ... extra meanings' (Fig 3d):

It was the first thing that came to mind really. Almost a stereotypical image of elites. And oh yes it has extra meanings. Rees-Mogg himself is like Lord Snooty the establishment character. So any image of Rees-Mogg fires off loads of meanings. LAB12

However, perhaps most of all, the Bullingdon archetype evoked elite educational institutions – primarily Eton College and the University of Oxford, but also the British public school system more broadly. The stone architecture that provided the backdrop to the Bullingdon image was itself a part of the Oxford University campus. Moreover the group of well-dressed, upper class ‘toffs’ depicted in LIB2’s image presentation (Fig 3a) were wearing the uniform of Harrow College—Eton’s historic rivals—and participants often used the term ‘Oxbridge’ to refer to Oxford and Cambridge simultaneously.

Outside the image task, elite education was often cited as the key differentiator between the life trajectories of the deprived and the privileged. For instance GRN1, a proudly working-class man who had spent much of his life campaigning on behalf of trade unions, contended that the elite ‘are no better than working class kids. They’ve just had access to public schools. An unfair head start. That’s what’s wrong.’ LAB12 expressed similar sentiments when discussing his own experience of helping his daughter move into student accommodation at the University of Oxford:

I thought that elite had gone away, but I rediscovered it because my daughter got into Oxford university. ... I was really surprised by the background of the other students. I was surprised there were people in her halls pulling in full bags of sports gear for cricket, tennis rackets, cases of champagne! And most from British private and public schools. LAB12

This account was characteristic of wider tendency among left-wing participants to frame elite ‘achievements’ as a product of structural advantages bestowed by intergenerational wealth and family networks, rather than the intrinsic talents or efforts elite agents. He continued that ‘people who go to private schools aren’t more intelligent than others, so it must be to do with process. Expectation that you could go, vision, seeing that people from your background do this stuff. And parents able to help you do it.’

The strong emphasis on educational inequality was surprising and was not replicated among conservatives or liberals. Universities appeared to play four roles in left-wing participant accounts of the elite. First, as a connective tissue between privileged families and elite career paths. Second, as reservoirs of social and cultural capital that prepared attendees for elite career paths. Third, as a place where left-wing participants had themselves personally encountered members of the elite during their own university days. And fourth as engines of change that had re-configured Britain's political geography such that prestigious graduate jobs were more and more concentrated in cities at the expense of towns and rural areas. LAB17, a woman in her early thirties who worked in the higher education sector, described how 'across media, government, the press, a lot of them studied PPE [Politics, Philosophy & Economics] at Oxford, [which] turns people into not quite carbon copies, but very much an Oxford way of doing things.'

The 'Oxford way of doing things' was understood to include not just the functional, pedagogical aspects of elite university attendance, but the social and cultural trappings that go along with it. That is, the implicit cultural norms and codes that one imbibes from such august surroundings. At their most essentialised, these included the codes of dress and manner depicted in images like *The Bullingdon Club* and *Toffs & Toughs*. LAB8, a man in his thirties who worked as a barrister, described how he had witnessed colleagues use 'cultural' and 'social capital' acquired from their elite educational backgrounds to advance their careers: 'the elite are the people who are best at networking, who know how to convert cultural capital and social capital. How you schmooze people and charm and flatter people.'

Contra the structural accounts of aristocratic power favoured by most left-wing participants, LAB8's was thus an unusually agentic account of Britain's elite, which attributed elitism to the actions of elite agents, even as he judged those actions obsequious and unjust. It may not have been coincidence that LAB8 was also among the only left-wing participants to advocate for greater 'meritocracy' in British society. Asked how he would change Britain's elite if given

the chance, LAB8 argued that 'A certain amount of elitism is inevitable, but we should aim for meritocratic elitism. ... You need an elite for the world to progress, but you can't have elites like your Boris Johnsons and David Camerons, born to rule who hinder progress. You can have positive elites or negative.' Others actively argued against meritocracy, contending that elitism *per se* was the problem, and that 'positive' elitism was thus an oxymoron. LAB7 argued that 'the concept of meritocracy isn't a particularly left-wing concept is it, it's the drawing out of people from the working class.' Whether or not participants felt that meritocracy was a desirable thus appeared to correlate with whether power was understood as a matter of structure or agency, and whether participants took individuals or classes as their unit of analysis.

Left-wing participants also cited the opportunities to meet people from 'posh' or elite backgrounds during their own university days, some of which had reinforced their negative expectations. LAB7 spoke disparagingly of 'Bullingdon-like behaviour' they had witnessed among wealthy students during their own days at university, which had made them 'reluctant' to admit that they had attended Cambridge, or indeed 'to ever engage with anything where you might wear a dinner jacket or identify yourself with something that other people might think is elite.' LAB18, a woman in her early sixties, told how university attendance in the South of England had prompted her to revise her own class status down from 'middle' to 'working,' on account of the ostensibly lavish lifestyles and generational wealth enjoyed by other students:

My first encounter with elites was at university at Exeter. There were a shedload of people from London. Big families. I didn't have the right family connections. I wasn't invited to whoever's house on a Greek island in the summer. LAB18

The consistent emphasis on specifically educational inequality among left-wing participants was unexpected. Responses to the demographic questionnaire suggested that it may have



revealed more about participants' backgrounds than the elite *per se*. Three-quarters of left-wing participants had attended university, compared to just over half of conservatives and liberals. This included five of the six participants who presented the Bullingdon Club image, and thirteen of fourteen who presented Eton/Oxford alumni, but only one of five who presented images of economic elites. Although this is a qualitative study that makes no claims to representativeness nor statistical significance, university attendance may have been associated with a greater concern for educational inequality, and non-attendance with straightforward economic inequality.

### 5.2.3 Geographic inequality: *'sucking the life out of the rest of the country'*

Left-wing participants tended to view power as concentrated in the hands of a chosen few, but did recognise pluralist aspects to many regards of elite power, including the 'intra-elite competition' that some attributed to the campaign for Brexit (GRN3). However when it came to physical geography, left-wing participants were consistently certain that power was intensely concentrated, although some differed regarding where and how these concentrations were located. Three different forms of geographical concentration were noted. Elite power was variously said to be concentrated in the South relative to the North, the cities relative to town and country, and London relative to everywhere else. The geographical concentration of power was experienced as a source of some frustration by participants. All were residents of the Red Wall region of England—a band of Northern towns some distance from the capital.

The North/South divide was a particular focus of LAB8's interview, who presented a map of the South East of England during the image task. He contended that life chances were intimately bound up with geography in contemporary Britain because of the distinct cultural codes that could be found in different places, and the highly variable degrees of prestige attributed them:

‘It’s not just your network but the social capital to know how to act like an elite. People from Halifax don’t have it the way people from Kensington do, it’s a completely different culture—people above the Trent line have to live in a country where all the standards are from the south east. It’s not very fair is it. Completely different culture, even between Kent and Essex. Everyone held to metropolitan standards.’ LAB8

LAB8 described the resulting social arrangements as ‘a country that’s completely lopsided. London is a city state. It’s completely different to the rest of the country. A dictatorship to the rest of the country.’ He continued that inequality between North and South was only intensifying with time, as more and more power was concentrated in the capital: ‘power used to be much more dispersed around the country with economic power up north and political power down south. But now it’s all concentrated down south.’ Participants cited several markers of power differentials between North and South. These included a dearth of ‘BBC correspondents north of Derby’, well-intentioned Southerners fascinated by ‘exotic Northern accents,’ and a lack of knowledge about the North among residents of the South.

**Figure 10. The southern elite**

LAB8



LAB8 pointed to the Halifax Piece Hall, an 18th century cloth hall where our conversation took place, as a living metaphor for the North's loss of industrial power ('this was a kind of stock exchange when it was built. Now it's all converted into retail'). LAB6 also cited the Piece Hall's conversion into a retail destination as a marker of the harms done to the North by 'industrial change:'

We've got a thing called the Piece Hall in Halifax. All the industrial stuff happened here. There were more millionaires per head around Halifax than anywhere else in Europe in 1900. [...] Halifax is an example of a town constantly badly affected by industrial change. LAB6

Identification as a Northerner typically entailed an antagonism against a privileged South. LAB8 explained:

We Northerners know where Kent and Sussex are but you ask someone from Surrey and they don't know where Lancaster is. ... All the decisions are taken in London. Where does parliament sit? Where's the city? They're all concentrated in the South East. LAB8

Although participants seemed to identify stronger with the North than the working class, LAB8's account suggested that the Northern identity was also a vehicle for anti-elitism against a privileged elite (in this case 'the South'). Both forms of identity, then, were associated with a clearly defined elite-other, much as Mouffe's (2005) relational theory of political identity might predict.

LAB18, a woman in her early sixties, also constructed her Northern identity by emphasising distinctions from a privileged South. She described how her Northern accent had diminished her class status during her time as a university student in the South: 'you can tell from the way

I speak, in the north I had a middle class upbringing—but in Exeter I was no one.’ She also credited her experiences as a Northerner studying down South with her conversion from a liberal to a left-wing worldview, as it was ‘only when I went to university that I realised there were divisions to do with class and North South and all the rest of it.’ LAB18’s conflation of class and place suggested that, insofar as left-wing participants experienced a ‘lived’ class identity, it was largely mediated through Britain’s apparently uneven political geography.

Some participants offered an alternative geographic analysis wherein power was not just concentrated in London at the expense of everywhere else, but in the cities at the expense of Britain’s towns and countryside. This concentration was sometimes said to have been driven by the expansion of higher education discussed above, which had increasingly turned formerly industrial Northern regions into ‘dormitory towns.’

Some particular bits of the North of England have changed their social character over the years, you know. So once they were mining constituencies. They started to become dormitory towns or whatever you know. And you would expect political change. LAB07

This was still a concentrative analysis of power, but one that took the form of a network with several powerful nodes, rather than a single dominant node.

At times, participants appeared frustrated about the changes these trends had wrought within their hometowns, which were felt to have been in some sense ‘demoted’ by London’s economic and cultural dominance. Outside London and a few other big cities, participants lamented that the places where they lived felt less and less like ‘proper’ communities, because of an apparent tendency of university-attendees to treat towns as places to ‘pass through’ on their way to more gainful employment:

[T]he South East was dog eat dog and we were more community based. It's changing though. It's all individualised. No community. There's no pubs anymore. The social outlook's gone. LAB8

Higher education was thus felt to be an accelerant of broader trends away from community and towards atomisation.

LAB2 associated Britain's 'uneven development' with Brexit, and the elite 'Oxbridge' educational institutions frequently cited during the image task:

There's definitely your Oxbridge university intelligentsia centred around cities telling the world what to do. Towns are left behind because that metropolitan elite have been sucking the life out of the rest of the country for quite some time. Brexit really shone a light on it. LAB2

However, the *metropolitan* Oxbridge was considered quite distinct from the aristocratic Bullingdon archetype. On this telling, Britain's universities had been key to the rise of a new form of professionalised 'liberal' elite, that participants associated with the New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

While some participants dismissed this particular elite as an invention of the conservative media, as in LAB7's image presentation (Figure 11), others felt it reflected a real change in the power relations of British society in recent years. LAB2 explained that:

The metro liberal elite. The Browns, the Blairs. People were able to cast them as an elite very easily. They hadn't had to deal with that kind of glare before. It wasn't until people like Johnson and Farage put a spotlight on that group. LAB2

This liberal Oxbridge elite had apparently played the chief antagonist in the 'populist' discourses around Brexit, rather than the Bullingdon elite opposed by most left-wing participants. Indeed, Chapter 6 tells how Bullingdon figures like Johnson and Rees-Mogg were described as the protagonists of Brexit discourse by several conservative and liberal participants.

**Figure 11. The mythic elite**

LAB7



That said, the validity of the 'liberal metropolitan elite' concept was a rare point of dissensus among left-wing participants LAB7 contested the idea during his image presentation, which depicted a headline from *The Sun* newspaper referring to 'snowflake liberal elite[s] whinging about populism.' LAB7 explained that a mythic metro elite had been cynically constructed by oligarchic newspaper owners to deflect popular frustration 'away from the real elite and towards the Labour party.' On this telling, 'what happens in *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* isn't just innocent expression of opinion by people like [Tony] Parsons' but rather a 'deliberate political strategy to appeal to the idea that there's a mass of people who have been ignored by political elites, and especially by Labour.' LAB7 was, then, not just aware that the elite could

be constructed, but constructed for specifically political purposes. He argued that the elite can be constructed by those in power to bolster the hegemonic power of actual elites.

Not all elites were felt to be concentrated in particular places. While the Bullingdon archetype was associated with 'landowning classes,' and thus bound to a corporeal, specifically British sense of place, economic elites typified by the images in Figure 9 were felt to be more mobile, globalised, and thus less rooted in a specific geographic place. While aristocratic power was closely associated with explicitly British cultural markers, such as the Oxbridge universities, archetypal images of boarding school life, and the British countryside, economic elites were often associated with signifiers of specifically American economic dominance. For instance, one participant presented an image of a pile of American dollar bills (Fig 9a) and another the Bloomberg Billionaire Index – an American-owned index of the wealthiest people in the world (Fig 9b).

Even when participants presented images of specifically British oligarchs, they often alluded to the capacity of financial power to cross borders with ease. For instance, LAB13 presented a graph of British household income, emphasising the disproportionate concentration of wealth in the top income decile, but went on to discuss the role of 'off-shore tax havens' in sustaining the wealth of the international super-rich. He ultimately called for 'several countries [to] band together and say we're going to take this money back from overseas territories.' LAB13's account was thus indicative of an internationalist streak present in many left-wing accounts, that did not confine political action to the borders of nation states.

#### 5.2.4 Villainy: *'the root of all evil'*

This chapter has focused on the descriptive content of left-wing accounts of the elite. The lead characters were an aristocratic elite and their entrepreneurial allies. The most consistent feature of left-wing accounts was the valences applied to this elite, who were almost-invariably

described in pejorative terms. The clearest message sent by left-wing participants was that the elite were the principal antagonist of their political realities.

Left-wing participants regarded Britain's establishment extremely poorly, as irresponsible stewards of the country's political destiny. GRN5 felt that *The Bullingdon Club* were 'really hardcore nasty pieces of work' who were 'descended from complete bastards.' LAB18 concurred that 'the elite always look to exploit someone' and cited 'slavery' as the 'the clearest present-day example – the elite could not have built all the great houses and finery and art without the exploitation of others.' Valences remained negative when left-wing participants discussed the cultural markers of elitism. GRN2, a non-binary person in their early twenties, disclosed that they had personally rejected a scholarship at Eton College because they 'didn't want to participate in that snobbery.' Referring again to the image of Jacob Rees-Mogg they had presented during the image task, LAB12 explained that 'that particular image [of Rees-Mogg] lying on a bench during a late-night Brexit vote came across as a smug sense of entitlement. That sums up the elite and establishment in this country.'

Although aristocratic elites were certainly considered imitable – some participants imitated 'public school' accents in jest – they were not thought to be 'worth imitating' (Nadel 1956:426) except as objects of ridicule. Of the many condemnations of the elite offered by left-wing participants, LAB15 gave perhaps the most definitive when she described the British monarchy as 'the root of all evil,' and declined to express her true feelings about King Charles III for fear of causing offence:

The root of all evil is the institution of the monarchy. Completely unelected group of people that have dated back to God knows when and have incredible power ... because they have a long tradition of being part of the establishment even though [King Charles] is clearly a calculating (pause) I can't even express it in words. LAB15



Left-wing participants rarely described the elite in less than negative terms. However, when they did, it was usually for one of two reasons – either the participant identified members of their own family with the elite, or they praised sections of elite culture for being less overtly sexist than other social strata. LAB6 credited her unusually ambivalent account of the elite to her ‘rich grandparents ... on the edge of what I would have thought of as elite,’ whose life trajectory from hired help to wealthy business owners had apparently provided her with valuable insights into working-, middle- and upper-class life. Her notions of the elite were thus ‘completely coloured by who I am. I don’t feel I am an elite, but I feel exactly like my family does. There is no one any better than me nor worse.’

However, this apparently neutral position was accompanied by a distaste for anti-elite politics in general, and Brexit in particular. A woman in her early eighties who continued to work in the fashion industry, LAB6 went on to describe Brexit supporters as ‘not particularly well-dressed Primark people.’ She also criticised the apparent ‘solipsism’ of ‘populists’ who ‘never stop to think about who’s elite and who’s not. They just focus on their own off the wall agendas.’ I detected an anxiety in LAB6 that she might be considered a member of the elite rather than the people, if push came to shove. This anxiety appeared to underlie an unexamined aversion to bottom-up social change led from outside of the middle/upper classes. She argued that ‘reform only ever comes from the middle classes ... like my grandmother and [Green Party leader] Caroline Lucas who’ve got enough [money] to be able to spend time trying to reform schools and prisons and whatever.’

LAB3 also alluded to having come from a wealthy family – ‘I had a very privileged education in a very conservative place, which at the time was like yeah it was great I’ll take all the advantage that you can give me’ – and also tended to downplay the villainy of specifically ‘old money’ elites. They contended that new money elites were more personally responsible for the exploitation that had brought them wealth, while old money elites were passive recipients of inherited wealth and could not therefore be blamed for the exploitations that had generated

their wealth, which presumably took place years before their birth. He explained that ‘there’s a suspicion of new money [...] it’s like where have you got all this from? Who have you exploited? With old money you can say it was your ancestor or William the Conqueror (laughs). But that now as a landowner you don’t exploit people.’ I inferred that both LAB6 and LAB3 felt that their family background was somehow dissonant with the egalitarian politics they had come to espouse. Both participants appeared to moderate their anti-elite sentiments for fear of being labelled ‘hypocritical’ because of their family background.

A similar interaction was evident between participants’ notions of the elite and their gender identities<sup>42</sup>. Although elitism was often associated with patriarchy and sexism by left-wing participants, gendered power dynamics appeared to constrain expressions of anti-elite sentiment by female members of left-wing parties. LAB11, a woman in her early seventies, strongly identified as an anti-elitist and noted that the interview questions had stirred strong emotions as she reflected on the injustices she attributed to Britain’s elite. However, in the closing minutes, she explained with feint embarrassment that she had sometimes found elite professional environments more welcoming than the working-class communities where she had grown up, by virtue of a relative lack of overt sexism:

I felt I would be more likely to get a decent job [in London] as a woman than in Oldham or up North. Because certainly in 1971 women were really not regarded seriously for serious jobs, you know. ... I think Northern men were particularly, I don’t know if misogynist is the right word. But you know. You heard of more women being taken notice of in London than in the north of England. LAB11

Asked whether this meant London was a site of both general elitism and gendered egalitarianism, LAB11 responded ‘yes, because you heard of more women making it in London,

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<sup>42</sup> Regrettably, although left-wing participants also associated elitism with whiteness, the sample of participants was insufficiently diverse to detect interactions between anti-elitism and racial identity.

and obviously I was ambitious.' This response suggested that LAB11 felt they had made concessions to elitism during her professional life as a means of sidestepping sexist obstacles to career advancement.

This apparent tension between feminism and anti-elitism was a source of discomfort for LAB11 and several other female participants. LAB16, also a woman in her early seventies, likewise felt that elitism was most intense in Britain's South East but that 'it is more sexist the further north you go.' Anti-elite sentiments expressed by left-wing female participants were thus tempered by this apparent inverse relationship between elitism and overt sexism. Male participants were apparently unaware of this tension and were also less likely to speak from an explicitly gendered perspective—although some noted that they were likely beneficiaries of 'male privilege' (GRN04, LAB8). Male participants also tended to use male pronouns to refer to elites in the abstract.

This was also true of some female participants. Indeed as LAB11's interview came to a close, she reflected that 'all the people I've mentioned as elites apart from the Queen are men. I think there is a male female divide there. Men still hold the power.' Gender norms surely contributed to the over-representation of male participants, who made up twenty-five of the thirty-six interviews (69%). These partial exceptions aside, left-wing participants consistently adopted an antagonistic stance against the elite. Many cited anti-elitism as a core part of their political identities. This is clearly a populist stance, but only populist *per se* if accompanied by the construction of a people. Chapter 7 details the conspicuous absence of Britain's 'fragmented' people (LAB7, LAB13, LAB2) in left-wing accounts.

### 5.3 One or many? (RQ1b)

I have detailed the content of the elite concepts constructed by participants by examining the words and images that populated their accounts (RQ1a). This section examines the forms participants attributed to the elite concept. That is, the degree to which the various elite archetypes detailed above were considered a cohesive whole or a disjoint set of parts (RQ2a). Forms were apparent in various spatial metaphors for elite power. Spatial metaphors are a core component of discourse analysis, as they reveal the spatial relations that make up the discursive formations that structure our social realities (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017). Discourse analysis has long used spatial metaphors like left versus right, high versus low, centre versus periphery, and forward versus backward to conceptualise politics (Bobbio 1994:33). For Laclau & Mouffe (1985:110), metaphor is ‘a part of the primary terrain [...] in which the social is constituted.’ For discourse theorists, metaphor, metonymy and synonymy are the linguistic operations ‘by which we relate to things to each other and, in so doing, “have” a world (Winter 2001:65).

For the most part, the metaphors used by left-wing participants implied that the elite was a cohesive whole located at a privileged position in social space, usually described as the centre or apex, suggestive of a monist theory of the British elite. For instance, LAB10 described British society as ‘like a pyramid, similar to feudal society’ wherein ‘the majority of people are at the bottom ... then you have the higher up tier of wealthy people and aristocrats and politicians depending what country you’re in. Then above them the really rich people at the top.’ LAB15, a woman in her early seventies, presented an image of Boris Johnson meeting with the late Queen Elizabeth II. However, like LAB10, she also invoked a pyramidal social structure with elite power concentrated at the top. Indeed she explained that she had considered presenting an image of a pyramid to represent the power structures of contemporary capitalism, which she described in terms of a populist up/down opposition between a hard-working proletariat and a monarchic elite:

The other thing that I almost put on the image was the pyramid of capitalism from the French revolution. ... You know you've got the working class at the bottom who work and feed the rest of the people in the triangle, and of course the monarchy is at the top of it. LAB15

Other participants also used metaphor to situate the elite near the top of society. LAB5 stated that they held a 'traditional view that there are all these pillars of society [and] there is a group of people that you know almost sit at the top of that.' LAB2 likewise described the Bullingdon Club as 'a small circle within the circles kind of like a Venn diagram.'

Most left-wing participants thus constructed a monist elite whose power was concentrated 'in one place' (Shapiro 2005:30) at the apex of British society. Although elite power was felt to be geographically concentrated – in the South, in cities, and in London – these spatial metaphors pointed to a more abstract form of concentration, in social space. Left-wing participants were generally sceptical of plural notions of the elite, but there were some scattered instances when they felt that Britain's elites had grown more pluralised over time, and/or that legitimately novel elite groups had in fact emerged. Although LAB5 still felt that the country was run by co-operation between 'the top echelons of the key parts of the country like politics, the legal system, financial system, business, ... media and so on' he felt that this elite was 'more fluid than it used to be. There was a time when those people all knew each other and looked out for each other, but I don't think that's the case anymore.'

If elite monism was a common feature of left-wing discourse, this statement by LAB5 showed that it was not a *necessary* one. For instance, GRN3 gave the most pluralised account of the elite among left-wing participants. He chose to give a verbal presentation in lieu of an image, and described a pluralised network of 'the rich, politicians, the press, royalty, and the Church of England' whose power derived from 'merit' and 'social entrepreneurship':

I don't agree with a society such that people are very poor or alternatively that people are very rich. So there's elitism in the accumulation of wealth, but there's also ... a political elite which may not be in touch with the needs of the country. There are elites in the press and in social terms. Obviously that leans in with aristocracy and royalty, but there are elites all over the place. GRN3

GRN3 thus felt that 'the establishment isn't a single thing' and cited the television program *Yes Minister* to illustrate the 'intra-competitive cabals' that constantly 'jockeyed for position' within his mental map of the British elite. However, towards the end of their presentation they noted a tendency of 'human nature' to 'concentrate the capable at the top.' I interpreted this apparent contradiction as an example of 'existence' pluralism co-existing with 'priority' monism (Schaffer 2010). At the empirical level, GRN3 observed multiple power centres in British society that appeared to be reasonably autonomous. However, his qualification that human nature tends to concentrate 'capable' people at the top was pitched at an ontological level, which revealed that apparently separated power centres nonetheless converge on a single point at the apex of social space, in some meaningful sense.

In sum, the mereological form attributed to the elite by left-wing participants tended towards monism, and thus recalled the Nairn-Anderson thesis on the British aristocracy discussed in Chapter 2.2. However, this monist tendency was not absolute. Traces of pluralism could be found in most left-wing accounts, particularly where empirical judgements of the elite crossed paths with ontological assessments. By concentrating many forms of power in a single archetype through image and metaphor, left-wing participants themselves converged on a highly consistent account that attributed the elite a definitive identity. Indeed, left-wing participants appeared to always-already know who the elite were and had little trouble bringing images of the elite to mind.

By attributing the elite a structurally – rather than incidentally – privileged position, left-wing participants implicitly constructed a hierarchical social reality, wherein social status depended on proximity to a unitary elite. For GRN2, this hierarchical mindset was a core part of the human condition:

We have a tendency to ... view others as above or below ourselves. People like to pick out our place in society rather than seeing others as equal. We like hierarchical sorting. GRN2

Left-wing participants sometimes qualified that this decidedly monist view of the elite, wherein old money, new money and global money all formed part of a reasonably cohesive whole, did not constitute a 'conspiracy theory.' They were more likely to argue that elite cohesion arises from common economic and cultural incentives shared by the elite as a whole, which were better explained by their social position than their individual preferences. For LAB17, 'the elite are very well connected. And I feel like a conspiracy theorist but there's an obvious drive to try and get that now, especially with cultural institutions to get elites who share the views of the tories.'

Two other participants concurred:

The people that run the country at the top of finance, politics, business, the church, everything. All those people come from similar background and know each other. And then or now I wouldn't think there was some conspiracy and that all these people were joined together. But nonetheless more loosely they are connected by their background, education, and having got into positions of influence and power. LAB5

I don't think there's any conspiracy. I don't think there's any over-arching group who control everything. I do just sometimes worry that it is just what happens when you get rich that you start to protect it. The unifying theme is that they don't want to shake anything up. And that works in their interest to keep things as they are. LAB13

These unprompted responses pre-empted accusations of conspiratorial thinking, and thus recalled Mills' (1956) defence of *The Power Elite* from charges of conspiratorial thinking<sup>43</sup>. A corollary of left-wing participants' preference for structural analysis was a general dismissiveness of elite 'agency,' which was felt to be an insignificant determinant of success. For instance, asked how one becomes an elite, LAB10 responded 'Luck, overwhelmingly. They're either born into it or circumstances outside of their control fall into place.' On this understanding, there was little need to worry about elite conspiracies, because structural alignment of elite interests would tend to overpower agentic collusion anyway.

That said, there was one exceptional case when LAB4, a man in his early fifties, gave what I considered a conspiratorial and indeed antisemitic account of transnational financiers that apparently directed the actions of not just the British government, but other governments around the world:

The rich people fund them anyway. ... [M]ost of them are the Russian Ukrainian Jew who came from Germany. Marks & Spencer, Selfridges, do you want to tell me a media company that isn't controlled by the Jew? So you tell me now how Boris [Johnson] is not going to be listening to them. LAB4

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<sup>43</sup>Elite unity lies in the coincidence of several structural trends on which I've spent so many pages ... precisely to avoid the kind of conspiracy theory into which some reviewers try to force a much more complicated view' (Mills 1957:147).



These statements were striking examples of a conspiratorial theory of power wherein specific, named figures in politics and finance – which in this case included then-Prime Minister 'Boris [Johnson]' – were 'controlled' by a central node. The identification of this node with a singular term (*the Jew* rather than 'Jews') suggested this was not just a racialised but also a concentrated, and thus monist theory of elite power.

This was not the structural monism affirmed by most left-wing participants, but an 'agentic' monism sustained by active collusion between elite agents. LAB4 continued:

Those are the things you don't see, and many people are going to be naïve about these things. People in the media. Same thing happened in the US. If you tell the truth now, they don't tell you you're lying, they tell you you're crazy. Because they know it's the truth. So they control it from underneath. The darkness in this world is underneath. But you won't see that on the inside. LAB4

Elite power was here described as a 'darkness' that was in some way elusive or hidden 'underneath' the visible institutions of power. LAB4's account was thus unique among left-wing participants in that it contained three themes that were only otherwise expressed by conservative participants: agency, the elusiveness of power, and conspiracy. These themes are developed in greater detail in Chapter 6.2, but LAB4's account serves as a reminder that overt racism and conspiratorial 'agentic monism' were not confined to any one political subgroup.

That said, it is worth noting that LAB4 was one of only two non-white participants, and the only participant who was not either born in Britain and/or to British parents. Although it is difficult to extrapolate from one case, it seems reasonable to assume that a black man whose accent I judged more typical of his native Nigeria than the North of England may have a more racialised experience of everyday life in British society. If so, the reification of racial hierarchy sometimes promoted by the internalised racism experienced by minoritised subjects

(Molla 2023) may have promoted a racialised, and indeed racist, analysis of elite power. It is unlikely that these same phenomena were experienced by white participants whose racial identity typically passes as an unmarked category in day-to-day life (Frankenberg 2020).

Although most left-wing participants felt that elites tended to converge on a single set of preferences, only LAB4 posited an overtly conspiratorial analysis. A majority of left-wing participants instead attributed elite convergence to mostly-unconscious structural forces, that were felt to bestow unjust advantages on the same narrow cohort with generation after generation. For instance, LAB7, a man in his early seventies who had been a member of various radical Marxist groups before joining the Labour party, argued that an alignment of economic incentives between 'new money' business leaders and 'old money' Bullingdon elites was sufficient to unite the two groups in common cause, even if they lacked a shared national culture. As such 'the people who run Amazon and Microsoft probably wouldn't share much culturally with the Bullingdon club. But they are part of the same group of people who now run things.' Naturally, this alignment of incentives was never absolute, but even at moments of divergence, left-wing participants tended to characterize the British establishment as the 'true' elite by virtue of its unparalleled longevity.

## 5.4 Discussion

Chapter 1 began with Nairn (1964:17) assertion that public notions of the British elite emerged from a 'cultural tissue of great variety and subtlety.' In this chapter, we learned that the elites conceived by left-wing participants were more subtle than various. Green and Labour party members constructed a strikingly consistent account of 'old money' families with historical links to Britain's feudal history, elite universities and Conservative party, whose shared interests compelled them to collaborate with each other and their allies in transnational finance to maintain their power. The Bullingdon Club establishment was the dominant faction, joined in recent decades by 'new money' and possibly mythic 'liberal metropolitan'

elites. These newcomers were felt to have emerged from the political economies of the Thatcher and Blair governments, respectively.

The elite's constituent parts were thus conceived as more co-operative than competitive. Most left-wing participants attributed this to structural forces rather than active conspiracy. This discussion section further explores three aspects of left-wing accounts. I discuss participants' strong preference for structural explanations of elite power, their commitment to the possibly-anachronistic Bullingdon archetype, and their tendency to identify *against* the elite rather than *for* the people. I conclude that the Bullingdon archetype may be so hegemonic on the British left that it constrains the emergence of left-wing populist discourse in Britain. By restricting the elite concept's capacity to 'float' between meanings, the elite antagonist of left-wing discourse may be less able to distil in a single signifier the heterogeneous democratic demands latent in the broader British population.

Left-wing participants constructed the elite from a relatively even mix of discursive and material characteristics, although those with overtly Marxist worldviews sometimes placed greater emphasis on the latter. Left-wing participants clearly favoured structural explanations—whether economic, geographic, hereditary, demographic or cultural—over agentic explanations of elitism. This was apparent in the analogies to concentric or pyramidal 'diagrams' that attempted to capture, through spatial metaphor, the unseen power relations operative in British society<sup>44</sup>. Elite agency was often minimised, and the apparent 'achievements' of elite individuals framed as products of structural advantages bestowed by family connections or good fortune—structures that allowed the elite to continuously reproduce itself even in the absence of active conspiracy among its members.

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<sup>44</sup> For Lefebvre (1974:29), such diagrams represent 'that which is not self-evident.'

Distinct forms of power were said to cluster together at the apex of society, allowing individual elites to move between distinct fields of power without shedding their elite status through exchange of financial, political, social and cultural forms of capital. The latter was associated with an elite imaginary that included black and white photographs, foppish accents and classical architecture. These cultural markers of elitism appeared to 'make visible the terminal forms of those dominant cultural norms rendered invisible by social structure.' This recalls the classic elite-antagonist of populist discourse whose 'hegemonic' attributes individually pass as 'unmarked categories' but together constitute a coherent, antagonistic identity (Aiolfi 2023).

Indeed, left-wing participants mentioned many of the 'old idioms and relics of aristocracy' identified by Savage, which buttress popular notions of the British elite:

The success of the National Trust and the exhibitionary complex which places *stately homes* at the heart of British leisure habits exemplifies this ongoing fascination with *the landed classes*. Television shows from *Brideshead Revisited* to *Downton Abbey* continue to deploy a gentry aesthetic. ... The traditional *private school* and *stately home* continue to serve as default sites for so much English novel writing, recent examples being by J. K. Rowling, Sarah Waters and Ian McEwan (Savage 2015:401, emphases added).

The aristocratic elite constructed by left-wing participants was, then, a mediatized account that drew on pop cultural portrayals of Britain's ruling class in television programmes such as *Downton Abbey*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *Yes Minister* and others. These media properties are, to a significant extent, meant to glorify British power structures by re-packaging Britain's aristocratic past as a romantic aesthetic meant to project soft power and attract tourism. However, left-wing participants consistently framed the same neo-aristocratic establishment

as an object of derision—indeed the British aristocracy was the object of most of the antagonisms expressed by left-wing participants.

However, as was discussed in Chapter 2.3, many contemporary elite theorists argue that the aristocratic model of the British elite is anachronistic. Although he recognises its continuing influence, Savage (2015:400) casts doubt on the empirical value of Bullingdon archetype in the present day, arguing that it 'no longer give[s] us a handle on the organization of privilege in Britain.' Departing from the Green and Labour party members who participated in this study, he suggests that Thatcherite new money is now the dominant species of British elite, while the old money aristocracy has receded to the margins. Propagation of the Bullingdon archetype may then distract from efforts to counter the inequalities wrought by twenty-first century capitalism:

Conventional images of George Osborne (sic) and David Cameron in their Bullingdon Club Oxford days ... are misleading. Such "Establishment" images can be mobilized to suggest that if only we could have true meritocracy and break down those remaining status barriers at the top, we might be able to address the inequities of social class. But this harking back to a critique of an old aristocratic culture is unhelpful. Elite educational institutions succeed not because they are in the pocket of the former aristocratic elite, but because they are at the apex of highly competitive recruitment and training processes which lie at the heart of contemporary neoliberal capitalism (Savage 2015:400).

I did not infer an implicit argument for 'meritocracy' in left-wing participants' persistent affirmation of the Bullingdon archetype. Indeed, some explicitly argued that meritocracy was incompatible with their egalitarian politics. However, by participating in the maintenance of aristocratic aesthetics, participants may inadvertently reinforce British elitism by obscuring present-day power relations beneath images of the past. Even when invoked as an antagonistic

villain, the Bullingdon archetype is likely a continuation of the ‘tradition of the dead generations weighing like a nightmare on the brain of the living’ that Nairn (1964:19) considered a central pillar of the British ruling class’s hegemony.

That the Bullingdon archetype was mostly emphasised by participants who had themselves attended university, while non-attendees typically focused on financial elitism, prompted several reflections. The finding dovetails with polling on the changing priorities of the political left in recent decades. As the left’s intellectual nexus shifted from the labour movement to academia, left discourse has increasingly focused on hardships faced by metropolitan university graduates such as housing costs and student loan debt (YouGov 2024). One’s preferred elite concept may then play a teleological role in left-wing thought, as an avatar for the form of hardship (educational or financial) most salient to one’s own life trajectory. The Bullingdon Club thus appeared to be a ‘constitutive outside’ of many participants’ own political identities (Mouffe 2000, Chapter 3.3).

Opposing the Bullingdon elite may have been a way for university graduates to distance themselves from the specifically educational privilege personified by Bullingdon members. Some participants noted that university attendance had provided them a degree of upward social mobility and thus moved them closer to the elite strata they otherwise opposed. Conceiving higher education as a hierarchy containing a conspicuous elite stratum from which they were excluded may have helped professedly egalitarian participants ward off self-stigmatizing feelings of hypocrisy—similar to those who appeared to moderate their assessment of the elite in light of their personal wealth or gender identity. These attempts to reconcile supposed contradictions within their political identities suggested left-wing participants were more concerned about ideological coherence than were conservatives and liberals, who were more content to acknowledge incongruities in their worldviews without further qualification (see section 6.2.2).

With the partial exception of some self-identified 'Northerners,' left-wing participants consistently attributed a more definitive identity to the elite than 'the people'. Green and Labour members thus appeared more unified by their shared opposition to neo-aristocratic and oligarchic notions of elitism than adherence to any positively constituted popular identity. This was evident in discussion of popular archetypes such as 'the working class,' which were typically referred to in the third person. This may constitute a shift from prior generations of left-wing activists who explicitly identified *as* rather than *with* working-class archetypes (Nairn 1973, Cohen 2010).

Changing attitudes to class may then have inverted the collective identities held by left-wing activists in contemporary Britain, so that they now identify as opponents of the elite rather than advocates of the working class. As Savage has argued:

Most people are now ambivalent and hesitant about which class they belong to. ... Class is important not so much as an overt badge (when people feel proud to belong to a class), but more in the way that it prompts moral and emotional reactions, especially negative ones. *It matters more which class you do not belong to, rather than which one you think you do belong to* (Savage (2015:365, emphasis added).

The monist form attributed to the elite may then have played an important role in the identificatory choices of left-wing participants, providing a definitive foundation in the absence of a 'lived' class identity. The left-wing identities affirmed by participants thus appeared to have been constructed negatively rather than positively. That is, as a mobilisation against—rather than for—a given class identity. Rather than 'an antagonistic form of us-building' (Vulovic & Palonen 2023:546) populist sentiments expressed by left-wing participants better resembled an antagonistic form of *them*-building.

Left-wing participants recognised that power was spread between multiple groups and institutions, but consistently argued that they nonetheless constituted a cohesive whole because their incentives were aligned by structural forces. To understand this act of folk mereology, it is worth returning to Schaffer's (2008) distinction between empirical and ontological mereology (see Chapter 2.2). Empirical mereology concerns whether one or many objects exist in a literal sense. Ontological mereology is more concerned with whether the whole or the parts constitute the fundamental essence of a set of elements. Viewed through this lens, most left-wing accounts appeared to be empirically pluralist but ontologically monist. The greater emphasis on monism in the spatial metaphors cited by participants suggested a preference for ontological over empirical analysis of social structures. Participants thus identified elitism with transhistorical social forces rather than the powerful individuals who exist at any given juncture. Power was thus conceived as both spatially and temporally concentrated in a privileged few—an 'all in one' conception of Britain's elite that better resembled a forest than a set of trees.

There was, then, little evidence that left-wing participants had been influenced by the post-structuralist deconstruction of the elite concept, nor the Keyser Sütze elite phenomenon discussed in Chapter 2 (Du Gay 2008). Left-wing participants appeared to 'always already' know who the elite were, and consistently cast them as lead antagonists in the political narrative of contemporary Britain. On the surface, this definitive, villainous elite concept seems compatible with the anti-elite component of populist discourse. Why, then, has left-wing populism been relatively unsuccessful in recent British history (Dean 2020)? It may be that the monist elite favoured by left-wing participants is too definitive for the signification practices basic to populism, that Laclau (2005a:153) conceives as 'an undecidable game between the empty and the floating.' On the contrary, the elite signifier appeared to have been thoroughly 'filled' (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000:8) within left-wing accounts. Although several



projects have been labelled left-wing populist in the recent history of the UK<sup>45</sup>, their lack of sustained electoral success relative to Brexit and its successor movements<sup>46</sup> may, then, be partly due to an inversion of the Keyser Söze elite phenomenon.

Where Du Gay (2008) warned that vague elite concepts allowed actual elites to escape public scrutiny, an excessively definitive elite identity may be incompatible with the strategic ambiguities of populist discourse (Zicman de Barros 2023). If you always-already know who the elite are, it may prove difficult to persuade others that your preconceived brand of anti-elitism addresses their particular grievances. Populist discourse may require an elite with fuzzier edges than that described by the left-wing participants in this study. In this sense at least, the elite concept's political potency may depend less on its content than its form.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has begun to answer RQ1 – 'how do Red Wall residents conceptualise the elite?' The left-wing account of the British elite was aristocratic, oligarchic, monopolistic, highly educated, geographically concentrated and villainous. These themes belied a political outlook in which elites and non-elites were sharply distinguished from each other, and social status was proportionate to one's proximity to a privileged cadre clustered at the apex of British society. They also revealed the enduring appeal, and potential limitations, of the Bullingdon archetype. While they surely captured important continuities between historic and contemporary power structures, their tendency to concentrate multiple forms of power 'in one place' may obscure important aspects of Britain's twenty-first century elite (Shapiro 2005:30). Moreover, interactions between the sentiments participants expressed about the elite and

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<sup>45</sup> These include Occupy, Momentum, Corbynism, Sinn Féin and elements of the Scottish independence campaign ((Gilbert 2014, March 2017, Woodford 2023).

<sup>46</sup> That is, the Johnson-led Conservative government elected in 2019 to 'Get Brexit Done' (Cooper & Cooper 2020) and Nigel Farage's Reform UK, which secured significant electoral breakthroughs at the 2024 General and 2025 Council Elections.

their demographic characteristics – particularly university attendance and gender identity – suggest that the elite concept may serve different political functions for different segments of the left.

Even where the *content* of the elite concept differed, the *form* almost invariably tended toward monism. Left-wing participants were thus always able to point to a singular position in social space where political antagonisms should be concentrated. This mental map of political reality was compatible with populist, us and them oppositions against a villainous power bloc, but may constrain the Red Wall left from grasping the full plurality and complexity of twenty-first century power. This points to a broader tension discussed in Chapter 2.3, between the distinct demands of sociology and left-wing politics (cf. Savage & Williams 2008, Du Gay 2008, Savage 2015). The former may require a definitive elite signifier capable of unifying collectives against a common enemy, while the latter abhors the false certainties of popular myth. However, an excess of certainty can also be politically self-defeating. Chapter 7 explores how suppression of the elite concept's 'open identity' might also constrain its rhetorical potential (Zannoni 1978:11).

## Chapter 6. Constructing the elite: conservative, liberal accounts

### 6.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 examines how conservative and liberal Red Wall residents conceptualise the elite (RQ1). These participants were grouped together as they tended not to construct the elite as a single 'all in one' archetype, as left-wing participants tended to do. Conservatives and liberals preferred to discuss elites across a broad range of apparently-autonomous elite domains on a 'one by one' basis. These included elites in government, business, philanthropy, academia, journalism, entertainment, trade unions, the military, and religious institutions. Conservatives and liberals were less likely to see the elites spread across these domains as part of a unitary, over-arching establishment. This partisan distinction, and its logical consequences, constitute the main headline finding of this thesis. Broadly speaking, the left constructed the elite as one, while conservatives and liberals constructed the elite as many. Chapter 7 discusses the political implications, particularly regarding the 'problem of distribution' highlighted in Zannoni's (1978) semiotic comparison of monist and pluralist elite theory.

However, it is important to note that these tendencies to monism and pluralism among each group of participants were not absolute. Every interview alluded to the monist and pluralist aspects of the British elite, and the pluralist consensus among conservatives and liberals was weaker than the monist consensus among left-wing participants. Monism played a significant role among a minority of conservative accounts, which described the ostensibly separate parts of the British elite as co-conspirators. This form of 'conspiratorial monism' was sustained by active collusion between elite agents, rather than the structural forces favoured by left-wing participants. In what follows, I conceptualise conspiratorial monism as a dual perspective of power in British society—a monist elite hidden beneath a pluralist façade.

The chapter follows the same structure as Chapter 5, consisting of four main sections. First, I list the images that participants used to represent the elite during the elite image task (Table 14). Second, drawing on verbatim excerpts, I explore how four themes (agency, multivalence, elusiveness and conspiracy) manifested during my conversations with conservative and liberal participants (RQ1a). Third, I examine the mereological forms participants attributed to the elite. That is, whether they tended to construct the elite as a coherent whole or a disjoint set of parts (RQ1b). Most favoured the latter, but a significant minority of conservatives constructed a dual perspective of the elite as a monist conspiracy concealed beneath a pluralist façade.

Finally, I discuss the discursive and political implications of the elite concepts constructed by conservatives and liberals. I conclude that conservatives and liberals were more likely to construct elite concepts that venerated or normalised elite status, in line with the anti-populist and status quo discourses reviewed in Chapter 3. The elite concepts constructed by conservatives and liberals were also more elastic, which may shed light on several recurrent features of twenty-first century politics, including the greater tendency of right-wing populisms to oppose certain elites while supporting others. It also raises questions about why anti-elite discourse appears to be less common among liberals than conservatives. This question is examined in greater detail in Chapters 7 and 8, which focus on the political implications of the elite concepts constructed by participants.

**Table 14. Images presented by conservative, liberal participants<sup>47</sup>**

Alias	Image(s)	Distinction	Power	Domain
LIB3	'Agency, then community'	Leadership	Psychological	Various
CON5	Butterfly casting bird-shaped shadow	Leadership	Psychological	Various
CON3	Lies, Damned Lies, and Politics	Competition	Intellectual, Hegemonic, Material	Various
CON7	William the Conqueror	Posthumous recognition	Coercive, Psychological, Symbolic	Various
CON4	'Power is always one step above mine'	Elusiveness	Intangible	Various
CON6	Masonic ring	Invisibility	Conspiratorial	Any/all
LIB5	<i>No image</i>	Elusiveness	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>
CON2	Loch Ness	Land ownership	Conspiratorial	Any/all
CON8	Whitehall	Institutional	Executive	Politics
LIB1	Selfie	Merit	Agency	Philanthropy
	WW2 soldiers	Heroism	Altruism	Military
CON1	1966 England World Cup team	Competition	Inspirational	Culture
LIB4	Social media	Technology	Hegemonic	Culture

<sup>47</sup> As in Chapter 5, images are grouped by theme using the three components said to be present in 'all' elite concepts by Zannoni (1978:11): (i) the *domain* where elite power is exercised, (ii) the source of elite *power*, and (iii) the *distinction* between elites and non-elites. Verbal presentations appear 'in quotation marks.' Multiple images presented by the same participant appear on separate rows.

## 6.2 Constructing the elite (RQ1a)

Conservatives and liberals gave highly heterogeneous accounts of the British elite. Image presentations were more varied than those of left-wing participants, both in terms of the elites depicted and participant interpretations of the brief (see Table 14). While a quarter of left-wing participants presented the same black-and-white photograph of *The Bullingdon Club* (see Chapter 5.2) each conservative/liberal image was unique. The aristocrats and oligarchs described by the left were present, as in the visual references to William the Conqueror (CON7), landed gentry (CON2), and Silicon Valley (LIB4) presented during the image task. However, this time they appeared alongside a varied cast of politicians, journalists, philanthropists, technologists, academics, soldiers, footballers, masons and monarchs.

The heterogeneity of conservative and liberal accounts was difficult to synthesize into a coherent narrative, because they did not cohere around a central archetype. Where left-wing participants constructed the elite as a forest, conservatives and liberals saw Britain's elite as a disjoint set of trees primarily assessed according to their individual merits. Where the themes discussed in Chapter 5 pointed to shared views among left-wing participants, the themes discussed in this chapter are better conceived as patterns of distinction, rather than straightforward continuity, between conservatives and liberals.

This section develops four themes in detail (Table 15). Theme 5 (Agency) saw elites described as those best able to harness their intrinsic self-confidence, charisma and skills of persuasion. Veneration of personal attributes sometimes shaded into moral ambiguity, and several participants implied that deceptive elite practices were permissible so long as they were carried out on 'our' behalf. Theme 6 (Multivalence) tells how participants used a broad range of valences to describe different segments of the elite on a case-by-case basis. Elites were sometimes depicted as antagonists whose unjust concentrations of wealth and power should be challenged. In other cases, certain elites were framed as aspirant 'role models' (CON1)

whose achievements were won on participants' behalf. These protagonist elites included monarchs, military heroes and even sports stars from Britain's past, and were often identified with a sense of specifically national pride. However, more often, elites were described as a mundane fact of life in twenty-first century democracies.

**Table 15. Themes inferred from conservative, liberal accounts**

No.	Theme	Illustrative quote
5	Agency	Agency and empowerment. That's the true nature of being an elite. LIB1
6	Multivalence	I've given my interpretation of power as a source for good but also the evil as well with the cliques and cabals. CON6
7	Elusiveness	Power is always one step above mine. CON4
8	Conspiracy	It may be that there's six people just pulling the strings at the top saying this is what we want. CON2

Theme 7 (Elusiveness) describes how participants constructed the elite as somehow elusive or intangible. Conservatives and liberals were thus less likely to participate in the image task, on the grounds that the elite concept was too vague to capture in a single image. One recused himself from the task, and several others elected to verbally present their notions of the elite. Finally, Theme 8 (Conspiracy) examines the conspiracy theories of unseen forces 'pulling the strings' of governments and industry from 'behind the scenes' posited by a significant minority of conservatives. I judged these theories logical extensions of the emphases on agency and elusiveness shared by most conservatives and liberals, that allowed participants to explain instances of elite cohesion without recourse to unobservable social structures.

### 6.2.1 Agency: 'the true nature of being an elite'

Conservatives and liberals consistently argued that elite power was primarily a matter of personal agency, and much was made of the attributes and actions of high-achieving individuals. LIB3, a woman in her early fifties who had previously worked as a mental health professional, made agency the central theme of the verbal presentation she delivered in lieu of an image. She explained that elite power had, in her lifetime, shifted from a predominantly sociological to a psychological phenomenon:

Years ago it would've been people in certain professions, you know sociologically. But I think there's been a shift, whether that's because of erm, the increase in personal wellbeing. More talking about mental health. It gives people more personal agency. So there's an element of the personal before we can get to the community. LIB3

In Chapter 4.x, I noted that my analysis considers social reality to be composed of four fundamental elements: discourse, materiality, structure and agency. By framing 'the personal' as somehow prior to 'the community', LIB3 drew a fairly explicit distinction between structure and agency. The former was said to be more determinative of elite status in contemporary Britain than the latter. However, LIB3 did not believe agency was *necessarily* prior to structure in any transhistorical sense. Had she done, the shift from communal to personal power she had observed during her lifetime would not have been possible. LIB3's account of elite power thus implied a conception of power that was fluid over time, not just in terms of the identities of the powerful, but also the nature of power itself. We were apparently living through a psychological age, but this had shifted in the past and would likely shift again.

LIB3 conceived elitism in more positive tones than most left-wing participants, who tended to see the elite as a social problem to be solved. LIB3 instead saw elite power as a correlate of



the desirable mental states possessed by those with a healthy sense of 'personal wellbeing.' She continued that:

For me [an elite] is someone who's got their own agency and ability to make choices. ... It's about decision making. That's what power is for me its decision making. And whether it's the information or the confidence or the courage to make the decision. LIB3

Elite psychology was also a strong theme of CON7's account. A man in his late twenties, during the image task CON7 presented an oil painting of William the Conqueror (Figure 12). He explained that William personified what he believed were the three components of elite power, that he termed psychic, physical and symbolic. For CON7, psychic power was a capacity to persuade others that 'clearly has a lot to do with personal psychology.' Physical power referred to the implicit or explicit threat of violence, while symbolic power was said to be a mysterious confluence of personal attributes and historic circumstance that caused elite individuals like William to be remembered long after their death.

**Figure 12. Elite psychology**

William the Conqueror, CON7



CON7 specifically chose a portrait of William the Conqueror produced centuries after his lifetime to represent this third form of posthumous, symbolic power. He contrasted the continuing cultural resonance of the name William the Conqueror against the lack of recognition afforded the artist who produced the portrait<sup>48</sup>:

The picture itself is evidence of the fact that William the Conqueror had [symbolic power] because we've forgotten the name of the guy who painted it, you know nobody knows. But we have [William], he had his likeness captured hundreds of years after his death, we know his name. We still have most people who refer to him deferently as The Conqueror. CON7

CON7 thus gave a highly personalised account of elitism that principally depended on the infamy achieved by specific, named individuals, and the posthumous respect shown them by non-elite publics.

CON1, a man in his early seventies, provided a more prosaic, but still agentic analysis of the elite. Rather than focusing on the power, influence, and wealth of one elite group or class, CON1 argued that any contemporary account of the British elite:

[H]as to include achievements outside just financial, commercial, or social influence. Hence a footballer being part of an elite squad. Or a man going to the moon. I suppose going back to the 1950s, you could say Sir Edmund Hillary was an elite as the first man to climb Everest. CON1

This framing opened our conversation up to an extremely broad range of social fields little-examined by left-wing participants. CON1 was keen to discuss sport, mountain climbing and

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<sup>48</sup> Credited to 'unknown artist' by the National Portrait Gallery.

even space travel, but less interested in the economic and political forms of elitism that tend to occupy mainstream elite theory (see Chapter 2). Like CON7, CON1 conceived elitism as a matter of specific individuals and their achievements. His image presentation focused on Bobby Moore, captain of the 1966 World Cup-winning England football team (Figure 13).

**Figure 13. Elite achievement**  
CON1



CON1 argued that Moore exemplified a sympathetic type of elite who had succeeded from humble beginnings. He credited Moore's success to his apparently superlative personal attributes: 'he came from a very ordinary London east end background. He was just an ordinary bloke who had this extraordinary skill and leadership ability.'

Like LIB3, for whom 'the personal' was the prime mover of contemporary elitism rather than 'community,' CON1's description of Moore seemed designed to subtly downplay the notion that structural impediments might constrain the ability of some to attain elite status for themselves. On this understanding, economic disadvantages were no barrier to sufficiently intelligent or industrious individuals. Although CON1 lived in the North of England, like all

participants, he derided the apparent tendency of 'people in the North' to complain that 'those people in London they've got all this money and privilege. They're part of the elite and I can't get there.' For CON1, aggrieved Northerners simply needed to 'get off [their] backside and work harder.'

CON5 also argued that personal application could overcome structural impediments to upward social mobility. She cited her 'middle class' life trajectory alongside that of her husband, who had grown up 'as one of six on a council estate.' While her affluent background granted her a 'well just do it, then' approach to life, she believed her husband had achieved comparable success because his working-class background had motivated him to 'achieve in order to survive.' For CON5, this comparative analysis:

[J]ust proves that I'm not sure how much upbringing actually effects things. Because upbringing actually pushed us both but for different reasons. His was about survival mine was well, that's what you do. So it's a whole host of reasons.

CON5

CON5's assertion that social mobility depends on 'a whole host of reasons' exogenous to one's 'upbringing' again seemed calculated to minimise the role of social structure in determining who within a broader community attain elite status. An aversion to structural analysis could also be inferred from conservative and liberal responses to the demographic questionnaire. These participants were marginally more likely than left-wing participants to identify as working class. However, this belied that most conservatives and liberals preferred to eschew class identity altogether. Five of eight conservatives indicated that they had no class identity, or that they were unsure what their class identity was.

The survey items meant to capture 'objective' indicators of class told a different story. Of the five conservatives who did not identify with a particular class, three owned their own home

and a fourth 'preferred not to say' whether they did or not. Two held management positions in business and local politics. Recusals from the class questionnaire item may, then, have indicated a possibly-unconscious attempt to avoid being identified as middle and/or upper class. By overtly dismissing the notion that their identity depended in some sense on their position within a social structure, these participants may have betrayed an awareness that I might judge their social position in a particular way, that may have coloured my interpretation of their notions of elitism.

I thus inferred that aversion to structural explanations of class may have served a psychological function among some conservative and liberal participants. LIB1, a man in his early fifties, e-mailed me days before his interview to explain that he felt able to give an authoritative account of elitism because he himself belonged to an elite family, which had endowed him with a set of 'inheritances' only some of which were financial:

I have come to see that the elite are in fact people like me and the families I am part of and connected to, [who] have all been close to wealth, power and influence in one way or another. Elite status is largely determined by inheritance. Not necessarily financial inheritance. I mean all the different types of capital that one can inherit. They say follow the money. But I thought, well, follow the family. Follow the bloodline. LIB1<sup>49</sup>

LIB1 here described what I considered structural advantages bestowed on him by his family network. During the interview, he observed that his children had benefited from similar advantages thanks to 'the conversations we have with them, the books at home, the cousins they mix with,' adding that he himself had attended 'a standard school' but, as an elite, 'still went to Cambridge and got to hang out with [notable sociologist] Anthony Giddens.'

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<sup>49</sup> Note: this excerpt came from the e-mail sent through by LIB1 some days before their interview, rather than during out conversation.

Despite providing an insider account of what I took to be the structural privileges enjoyed by elites, nonetheless LIB1 was emphatic that elitism was primarily a matter of agency: 'I'm trying to communicate to you that you need a definition of agency and empowerment. That's the true nature of being an elite.' He credited his own high standing to his personal 'investment' in his own talents – 'I've invested in myself which means I can influence people. I have a strong feeling of agency.' This statement appeared to gloss over the fact that many of the 'investments' in LIB1's apparent sense of agency had come from outside of himself – indeed often from family circumstances that preceded his birth.

LIB1 was, however, more willing to credit structural forces when considering the life trajectories of non-elite sections of society:

The dysfunction of Britain today is a lack of sociological literacy ... everyone with a GCSE in geography knows we had a baby boom after the war that was not replicated in subsequent generations. Now boomers arrive in retirement and there aren't enough workers coming behind them to sustain these jobs. And so these people are opposed to foreigners even as they go into care homes where there's no one available to wipe their arses. LIB1

This analysis, wherein the lives of the less well-off were determined by structural forces and those of the powerful by their own efforts, reminded me of my conversations with LAB3 and LAB6 (see Chapter 5.2). These participants also described their families as elite or privileged, and gave the only neutral-to-positive accounts of the elite among left-wing participants. Irrespective of political orientation, membership of an elite family appeared to correlate with relatively benign conceptions of elite status as just deserts for hard-working individuals who attain it. Meritocracy beliefs of this kind may have mitigated emotional or cognitive dissonances that could otherwise arise from acknowledging that the elite status enjoyed by our loved ones were a product of ultimately inequitable forces outside their control.

CON5 shared LIB1's emphases on agency and family with respect to the elite, going so far as to describe elitism as having 'a genetic part to it. Some people are born with or without that power. That feeling or belief. That self-strength.' References to elite 'bloodlines' (LIB1) and 'genetic' elitism (CON5) by apparently wealthy, white participants hinted at an unsettling racial analysis of elitism that never quite broke the surface of either interview. Agency thus seemed an alternative, rather than complementary, lens on elite power to the structural explanations favoured by left-wing participants. Indeed, conservatives and liberals sometimes evaded prompts to consider the structural aspects of elitism. When CON2 was asked whether and how he would change Britain's elite given the chance, he responded that:

It's not so much the system for me that I came on this to discuss with you, it's more on just what is the elite. And we've mentioned landowners, but then there's other types of elite for me in terms of power. ... [T]he most common one for me as I say would be landed gentry or aristocracy, but there's also power elites, financial elites. CON2

Consistent with a broader disinterest in social structure shared by most conservatives and liberals, CON2 here stated quite explicitly that he had not expected or intended to discuss 'the system' during our conversation. Rather, he intended to examine the attributes of the individuals who populated the various segments of Britain's elite strata.

Conservatives and liberals thus placed a high premium on the interpersonal attributes of elite individuals, particularly their capacity to persuade others by their personal charisma or force of character. CON2, a man in his early sixties, distinguished the discursive powers of charismatic individuals from the coercive powers entailed by land ownership and material wealth:

I've known people who when they walk into a room you just want to do your best for them, because they're so charismatic and such leadership qualities exude that you just think ah you know I'd do anything for you. And I've been in that position. You know it's like wow – this person is so like there and on it and respectful and communicative and all that sort of thing. It's like ah I just want to work for them. And they're also people I'd consider elite but not necessarily in a position where you would think of them as wealthy or landed gentry. Just in a position of authority that commanded respect. CON2

Speaking from personal experience, CON2 here described the capacity of some elite figures to inspire loyalty from those around them, apparently by their very presence. CON3 likewise argued that 'the persuasiveness that some person has over a group of people' constituted 'the essence of power.' He illustrated his argument by crediting his membership of the Conservative party to his personal relationship with a local councillor, whose charm and intelligence had motivated him to become politically active 'late in life.' CON3's conservatism did not appear, then, an expression of deeply held ideological commitments, but of faith in the competence and good intentions of local party elites.

CON5 arguably placed the strongest emphasis on personal attributes. A woman in her late fifties who had held leadership positions within a multinational business, CON5 presented the image of a butterfly casting the shadow of a bird featured in Figure 14. The image was meant to represent the apparent capacity of 'everyone' to achieve elite status via their innate leadership skills, which were principally cultivated through the hard work and self-belief of elite individuals:

I've done a lot of mentoring and one of the big things that always came out to me was if somebody believes they can, if they have that self-confidence and



belief, then they will be successful ... and the fascinating thing is that's proven itself to be true. CON5

Statements of this type implied that elitism was neither a relative phenomenon, nor necessarily confined to a privileged few. Instead, all individuals could achieve elite status and should be supported in doing so. Personal attributes were also said to determine who did *not* count as an elite. CON2 argued that the foppish interpersonal style of Boris Johnson– cited as a marker of elitism by some on the left – in fact indicated that Johnson was not an elite: 'you look at Boris and you think – is he elite? I don't think he is. He's been prime minister, but I still wouldn't regard *the person* as an elite' (emphasis added). CON2 acknowledged that Johnson had attained a powerful position within a broader social structure but felt that he was not an elite so long as his interpersonal style remained informal or irreverent.

**Figure 14. Elite empowerment**

CON5



The charisma and powers of persuasion attributed to elites by conservatives and liberals were rarely pejoratised.. For some, it did not appear to matter whether elites were seen to use their persuasive powers for good, so long as they 'got things done' (CON4). CON5 argued that, when figures of authority addressed members of the public, charismatic delivery was both more important and more laudable than the empirical content of the message being delivered:

If you go to the doctor and they say (monotone voice) well I'm going to look at this and I think I might do that. Or if you go to someone and they say (assertive voice) right what I'm going to do is I'm going to da-de-da-de-da because this is what I'm thinking at the moment. You're going to feel completely different even though they've said the same words. If they're exuding that confidence in their own self-belief you therefore immediately have confidence in what they're telling you. CON5

Even regarding her own health, when one might expect a sober statement of the relevant facts to be of paramount importance, CON5 placed higher value on the assertiveness with which the facts were expressed. She went on to identify persuasiveness with elite power in all social domains, arguing that the capacity to persuade was paramount within 'everything we do every day:'

Self-belief for me is power in every walk of everything we do every day. You can reflect it on anything ... when you walk into a room if you've got someone that sort of walks in with their book and they kind of sidle in and they put it down and they start to speak then you think who are you? What are you saying? What? And yet if someone comes in and puts the book down and goes right let's start. Shall we start? And you think oh I'm really interested in what you've got to say. And it's just that whole confidence. CON5

Several conservative/liberals placed a similar premium on personal 'competence,' sometimes at the expense of personal morality. CON3 argued that, although accusations of bullying levied toward a local MP were likely accurate, this should not detract from their reputation as a highly competent and productive public servant. After conceding that 'Machiavellian is the word used [to describe the MP] and I think it's probably true,' he immediately qualified that 'I should say they were a very skilful politician. Very, very good at running their own group.' CON3 thus implied that being an effective politician offered some compensation, if not redemption, for moral failings enacted during political life.

I interpreted these implicit preferences for competence over morality as a dark edge of the agency-based model of elite power shared by most conservatives and liberals. At times, this model gave rise to ostensibly authoritarian and/or anti-democratic sentiments. CON5 reflected that:

We shackle people back all the time. If I'm going to stand [in a local election] I need to take a less democratic approach. Because actually we've almost taken democracy so far that it's become self-damaging. There's too much democracy in a way. Everything's stuck in the mud. We've gone so far that you've got to strip a bit of that back. CON5

It thus appeared that those who considered power a function of elite individuals and their competencies sometimes saw the democratic wishes of publics as a regrettable constraint on the capacity of elites to 'get things done.' CON4 likewise argued that 'the idea you can run every organisation along democratic lines is for the birds.' CON7 went further, contending that British society had pursued a 'misguided obsession with democratisation' in recent decades. He cited devolution of powers from the British parliament to national assemblies in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and the inauguration of an independent Supreme Court as dilutions of British 'sovereignty' that had ultimately harmed the nation's wellbeing.

In sum, conservatives and liberals identified elitism with the actions, preferences and indeed psyches of highly competent individuals. This agentic approach suggested that most elites merited their positions because of their personal talents and leadership abilities, which were ultimately felt to benefit society as a whole. Veneration of elite agency thus appeared to be a necessary component of a broader belief in meritocracy, which was sometimes used in a defensive manner to steer our conversations away from apparently uncomfortable themes of structural dis/advantage. Many of these accounts were superficially benign, but racialised and/or anti-democratic sentiments were sometimes apparent just beneath the surface. When structural determinants of social status were discussed, they were more often used to explain the life trajectories of non-elite groups than those apparently deserving individuals who had attained public positions of authority or high regard through hard work and personal investment.

#### *6.2.2 Multivalence: 'a source for good but also evil'*

Conservatives and liberals applied a broader range valences to the elite, contra the near-invariably pejorative tone adopted by left-wing participants. Their focus on individual elite agents – rather than groups or classes – naturally provided a more granular, multi-faceted account of Britain's elite, and were thus less likely to make normative judgements about the elite as a whole. Instead, elitism was broadly felt to be *'a source for good but also evil'* (CON6), and positive, negative and neutral sentiments were applied to individual elites on a case-by-case basis. Some conservatives and liberals expressed anti-elite sentiments that recalled those shared by most left-wing participants. However, others considered elites role models whose 'achievements' were won on behalf of the broader public. Still others believed that elites were neither heroes nor villains but simply 'facts of life' likely in any human society. Neutral accounts were often accompanied by scepticism about 'utopian' wishes to minimise elitism through political intervention. This section details the varied cast of protagonists and

antagonists that conservatives and liberals identified among the British elite, and those whom participants attributed moral shades of grey.

### *Elite protagonists*

CON1 argued that the British elite's primary function was to act as positive 'role models' for the non-elite public. As he put it: 'I think we need these people in society who we can look up to and say crikey!' CON1 clearly drew enjoyment and pride from the triumphal image of the 1966 World Cup-winning England football team he presented during the image task (see Figure 13). CON1 felt that the World Cup had been won on his behalf by virtue of the national identity he shared with Bobby Moore and his teammates. Elites were not here depicted as oppressive or exploitative, but as national heroes who worked on behalf of the (specifically British) people. Indeed, national identity was a recurrent trope among the elite protagonists depicted by conservatives and liberals during the image task. These included LIB1's image of British soldiers fighting at the Battle of Arnhem in World War 2, CON8's image of British government offices at Whitehall, and CON7's image of William the Conqueror, all of which were meant to indicate heroic figures who had contributed to British society in particular.

A sense that elite achievements were won on behalf of a nation was also apparent when discussing elites from outside of the UK. Asked whether society needs elites to function, CON1 responded without hesitation:

Yes! There's a song isn't there, where have you gone Joe DiMaggio, a nation turns its eyes to you. Joe DiMaggio was a hero in baseball in America. And I think every society needs someone to look up to and follow. And I suppose going back seventy years we had war heroes like the guy who led the Dambusters Raid or whatever. We had Edmund Hilary and Bobby Moore. CON1

Here CON1 grouped British explorers, military personnel and sportspeople together as a set of heroic leaders that society should admire and seek to replicate. Moreover the song lyrics about Joe DiMaggio<sup>50</sup> also contained an explicit reference to nation, followed by a qualification that DiMaggio constituted a 'hero ... in America.' This was a more sympathetic, indeed aspirational account of the elite than any given by left-wing participants, that suggested that national borders played a significant role in delimiting which elite achievements were won on 'our' behalf.

Elite protagonists were not always constructed around national pride. Continuing his inside account of life in an elite family, LIB1 emphasised the social benefits of the philanthropy, employment, and leadership brought about by specifically hereditary elites. At this point in data collection I had grown accustomed to hearing hereditary privilege pejoratised by left-wing participants, who considered familial elitism a social problem to be solved rather than celebrated. I was therefore struck by LIB1's optimistic tone as he described seeing his children access the elite educational pathways that left-wingers associated with the hated Bullingdon archetype.

I can see it in my own children. The eldest is very well placed to be successful. My daughter is preparing to apply to Oxford ... and the youngest just gets top marks in everything and is just a brilliant kid. So here we go. Roll the dice on another generation of elite people. LIB1

Conservatives and liberals were much more sympathetic to the Bullingdon archetype than most left-wing participants. LIB1 implied that there was nothing inherently undesirable about the advantages enjoyed by Oxbridge alumni. Others defended the specific individuals depicted

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<sup>50</sup> From Simon & Garfunkel's 1968 single *Mrs Robinson*.

in the famous Bullingdon Club image from criticisms of their elite backgrounds. CON1 dismissed anti-elite sentiments toward 'Boris and Cameron' as politically motivated:

If you want to knock somebody you'll find a way to have a go at them. [Tony Blair] was brought up in the best school in Scotland and you know people didn't knock him for that. Whereas they knock Boris [Johnson] and [David] Cameron for having been to the best public schools in England. CON1

Johnson was the most common beneficiary of these defences, which were not limited to members of the Conservative party he led during the data collection period. LIB5 also decried how 'people knock Boris and there's things he's done wrong but [...] we've watched him climb the ranks and become the Mayor of London and go from there. So he's not just come straight in at the top he's worked to get to that position.' This response suggested that LIB5 may have been unaware of Johnson's privileged upbringing that was crystallized in the Bullingdon Club image presented by a quarter of left-wing participants (see Chapter 5.2). The elite imaginary shared by most on the left did not appear to cross party lines.

### *Elite antagonists*

The presence of elite protagonists differentiated conservatives and liberals from left-wing accounts, which almost-invariably framed the elite as villainous enemies of the non-elite population. That said, elite antagonists were not absent from conservative and liberal accounts, nor was shared national identity a guarantee of protagonist status. CON2's image presentation used a photograph of countryside around Loch Ness to construct an antagonistic image of Britain's 'landed gentry':

It always brings back a story I heard which is probably where my political interest starts. A guy walking across a field and another man on a horse rode up and said *you there what are you doing here?* And he said I'm going for a walk, and he said *you can't walk here its private land.*

And the guy said well, who owns it? And he says *I own it and my family's owned it for centuries.* And well why do you own it? *Because we fought for it and won it.*

Well get off your horse and I'll fight you for it now. CON2

CON2 thus depicted Britain's landed elite in populist terms, personified by a gentryman peering down at a member of the underclass from an elevated position on horseback. Although conservatives expressed fewer anti-elite sentiments than left-wing participants, those that did appear tended to be voiced in a more overtly confrontational register. This may have reflected the respective preferences for structure- and agency-based explanations of elite power. On the left, anti-elitism opposed abstract social structures, while CON2 took aim at concrete individuals more compatible with confrontational fantasy.

Other elite antagonists described by conservatives and liberals included shadowy secret societies described by CON6 (discussed in greater detail in Section 6.2.4) and LIB4's highly critical account of entrepreneurial and technological Silicon Valley elites. However, even those who took a broadly anti-elite stance tended to qualify that their critiques did not apply to the elite as a whole. Asked for final comments before his interview concluded, CON6 responded 'no, I think I've pretty much given my interpretation of power as a source for good but also the evil as well with the cliques and cabals.' CON6 did not, then, consider the 'cliques and cabals' representative of elitism as such, but rather of a 'bad' elite whose machinations might be attenuated by counter-elites with better intentions. Similarly, despite his grievances toward Britain's 'landed gentry,' CON2 described a series of unpleasant personal interactions with



'people that I'd have thought were elite but turned out to be disappointing.' This choice of words implied that CON2 held elitism *per se* in relatively high regard, even if individual elite figures sometimes fell short of those standards.

### *Ambivalent elites*

Conservatives and liberals were more likely to speak of elites in ambivalent terms, and/or to assign distinct normative judgements to different sectors of the elite. LIB1 considered the upper echelons of British society the site of a perennial 'inter-elite argument' between factions with distinct motivations, some of which he considered more commendable than others:

You get inter-elite arguments in our politics. People attack the universities because they generate ideas that don't suit other parts of the elite. And there is a white supremacist elite in the British and even moreso the American elite. They don't want to include a multicultural elite so push against them. I also work with Afro-Caribbean emerging upper-class elites, and they're just as protective of their elite status as anyone else. They've just made Floella Benjamin a member of the Order of Merit. You can't get more elite than that and from my point of view that's fabulous. LIB1

LIB1 thus considered elite power a force that could be turned to good or evil. In some cases, elite power could even redress historical injustices, such as those associated with the racist oppression of people of Afro-Caribbean descent. On this telling, social justice was not necessarily a matter of eliminating elitism, but of ensuring that multicultural counter-elites were empowered over the racist elites responsible for their oppression.

It may not have been coincidence that LIB1 chose a member of 'the Order of *Merit*' to exemplify 'good' elitism. Conservatives and liberals tended to distinguish 'good' elites from

'bad' according to standards of achievement and meritocracy. CON1 likewise argued that, although many members of the elite 'did a fantastic amount of good,' others simply turned their elite status to selfish ends:

There were these elite people who were these landed wealthy establishment figures. But what did they actually achieve? Actually do? And some did a fantastic amount of good work. Superb things. Ran farms, ran industry. But some sat on their assets and didn't do much. ... So it's all down to what do people contribute, what do they achieve. And that's why I think the elites I've alluded to – the captain of a World Cup winning football team, or the first man on the moon or to climb Everest. They're the ones who've achieved things. CON1

Elitism itself was here ascribed a neutral moral character. Elites as such were not considered problematic – rather their desirability was judged according to their productivity and achievement.

Conservatives and liberals thus offered relatively ambivalent assessments of the elite, both as a whole and regarding the individuals who comprise it. Conservatives and liberals were also distinguished from left-wing participants by their occasional willingness to praise elite figures associated with their political opponents. CON1 praised a former adviser to Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair for their apparent ability to 'assess the mood' of the nation and thus guide government strategy.

Alastair Campbell I thought was absolutely brilliant. An amazing communicator person to assess the mood. Keep trade unions happy in one way, keep taxes on the wealthy in another way. Do a certain amount of nationalisation but don't do too much. He had to keep the old Labour principles

alive in some degree otherwise he'd have been out. But he trod a very clever line

I think. Did very well. CON1

CON1 was presumably opposed to the political goals pursued by Campbell but admired the way he went about achieving them. Statements of this type sometimes struck me as a peculiar, amoral politics where ends could be justified so long as they were pursued competently – even if, as in CON1's account of Campbell, competence entailed required the politician in question to speak out of both sides of their mouth in order to curry favour with naturally antagonistic groups simultaneously (e.g. 'trade unions' and 'the wealthy')..

LIB1 offered a similar defence of Elon Musk – the world's richest person at the time of writing. Despite their personal distaste for Musk and his politics, he described Musk as a 'genius guy' and elitism as 'a fact of life' that incentivised capable people to generate social goods such as employment, philanthropy, and innovation.

I just think elites are a fact of life. An emergent property of all human society.

... I don't particularly like Elon Musk and his politics, but car manufacturers didn't give a shit about electric cars even though it was destroying the planet.

And Musk came along and disrupted it. We need these genius guys even if we resent them. LIB1

LIB1's description of Musk was illustrative of another tendency among conservatives and liberals, who sometimes implied that a willingness to acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of elitism was a commendable trait in its own right. LIB1 presented his capacity to balance his personal resentment of Musk with an admiration of Musk's apparent 'genius' as a mark of maturity.

An extreme example arose when I asked CON6 how he had acquired his opinions about elites. CON6 cited video footage of Adolf Hitler as his earliest and most formative memory of elite power. CON6 described how he had been impressed by Hitler as an otherwise 'unremarkable man' who achieved power through personal charisma:

When I was very young and I used to watch Hitler. He was a very small man. A very unremarkable man to look at. But he had this thing where he could speak you know and the actions where people would start raving and shouting. ... And then in British politics I started looking for the same sort of things. Churchill would go down the street and people start cheering and waving. That's what I associate with power. CON6

Although he stopped short of endorsement, CON6 admitted that Hitler's oratory skills made a significant impression upon him, such that he began 'looking for the same sort of things' in British politicians.

This mix of positive, negative, and ambivalent sentiments contrasted with the condemnations of elitism consistently expressed by left-wing participants. Elites were neither cast as heroes nor villains, but as morally ambiguous actors who might bring social benefits or harms, depending on circumstances. Many thus felt that elites had a net positive effect on society. Asked whether British society 'needs' elites, CON2 responded:

Yes is the kneejerk answer. Because elites tend to lead, I think. There's those behind the scenes that just want to keep their anonymity and all that sort of thing. ... And I'm not saying they're all leaders because they're not, but those that put themselves forward yeah definitely I think yeah. CON2

CON2 thus assigned distinct normative judgements to different parts of the elite based on their ability to 'lead' mass publics. This ability differentiated protagonist-elites who 'put themselves forward' from the sinister, anonymous elites who were presumed to orchestrate events from 'behind the scenes.' This distinction played a role in Theme 7, wherein a good number of conservatives and liberals described at least some forms of elitism as somehow 'elusive.'

### 6.2.3 Elusiveness: *'power is always one step above mine'*

The moral ambivalence detailed in Theme 6 appeared to be related to a deeper uncertainty about just what constituted an elite identity among conservatives and liberals. Several reported difficulties during the image task, typically on the grounds that the elite was too complex or intangible a concept to be captured in a single image – or indeed to be captured visually at all. It was for this reason that LIB5, a man in his early fifties, recused himself from the image task. After several minutes of reflection, during which he asked to be shown images presented by other participants, he eventually stated that: 'I would see [elite power] as a negativity to be honest. As a negative word. I'm not a fan of the word power, it can be abused.' LIB5 went on to explain that 'abuse' of the elite concept occurred when it was used in a politically motivated manner, and that anchoring the elite concept to any particular image would have carried political connotations he judged inappropriate for an apparently descriptive study of the elite concept.

Although they did not join LIB5 in recusing themselves from the image task, several other conservative/liberal participants used the image task to emphasise the elite's intangibility. CON4 expressed outright consternation at the image task brief ('what on earth did you want me to bring along?') and eventually chose to present a quote in lieu of an image—'power is always one step above mine'—that he attributed to Baroness Gillian Shephard MP. For CON4,

this quote captured the fundamental ambiguity of elite power<sup>51</sup>. No group or individual could definitively be labelled elite because power, by its nature, perpetually relocates to 'the next step' relative to the observer.

This infinite deferral of meaning appeared to open elite identities up to endless interpretation, such that conservatives and liberals were less willing to make definitive statements about the elite and their position within society as a whole. CON8 hesitated before beginning their presentation, and asked for clarification whether other participants had interpreted elitism 'as political power? Or a sociological perspective? Or the power of parents, say? Or something else?' Although he eventually settled on an image of Loch Ness to represent the British landed gentry, CON2 described his initial reaction upon first learning of the image task as one of bemusement: 'I thought actually I've not looked up the definition of the word elite. I don't know if it means good or bad or just at the top of the pile. I'm not quite sure what it means. I suppose it depends.'

Others pointed to the constructed, narrativized aspects of elitism to illustrate the impossibility of assigning a definitive identity to the elite. Although it had primarily been used against his political opponents in the Labour party, CON1 concurred with several Green and Labour party members that 'the liberal metropolitan elite' oft-discussed by British newspapers was largely a narrative creation used to denigrate the British left:

I think people like to put a label on a group of people who disagree with them. Rather than saying there are people in society who for their own valid reasons think a different way from me and they're entitled to their view, their views are valid, they've analysed their views and think like this – which is how I look at things. CON1

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<sup>51</sup> Shephard's (2000) autobiography is titled *Shephard's Watch: Illusions of Power in British Politics*.

Although they rarely attributed a definitive identity to the elite as a whole, some conservatives and liberals found it easier to construct certain types of elite than others. CON1 found it easy to identify elite figures in sport, exploration and pop music. However, asked to comment on Britain's political and business elites, he hesitated before describing an 'amorphous ... system' populated by 'suited faceless people.'

A system that a lot of people see as just there and that gets in the way. You know puts up interest rates now and again. And why do we pay good money to these suited faceless people who obviously are in an elite role? CON1

Conservatives and liberals were, then, more likely to conceive elite power as somehow ambiguous. However –paradoxically – they were also more likely to claim that they had acquired their views of the elite from empirical observation.

Asked how they had acquired their notions of the elite, CON5 cited '[their] own experience.' CON2 likewise pointed to 'observation, interaction, and media.' CON3 politely declined the chance to pause to 'think about' where his opinions about elites originated, as he believed they arose from simple empirical observation apparently unmediated by ideology or social positionality:

I think [my opinions about elites] are empirical. You said to take a minute to think about it but, yeah I think they're empirical and just observation over the years. CON3

Like the focus on elite agency discussed earlier in the chapter, a preference for empirical *observation* rather than rational-reflective *analysis* of Britain's elite appeared to nudge conservatives and liberals away from the structural analysis of elitism

favoured on the left. I inferred an empiricist streak in CON5's critique of the British media, which she felt was insufficiently 'objective' in their reportage of empirical data:

The people in the country are being treated as stupid. They say I need to analyse and tell you what's really happening in my newspaper as opposed to here's the data what do you think. CON5

Others indicated that they had become politically active because of a wish to observe – empirically – the internal workings of local politics. CON2 shared that 'it wasn't [a] politically motivated thing that got me going, I'd just got some time, and ... wanted to see how it worked from the inside.' CON7 likewise stated that 'away from my family ... I developed a real interest in parliament and the way everything works.' They thus described their perspective of 'state power in this country' as the product of many years of 'observation ... fuming around to people asking like why are we [the Conservative party] so shit and useless?'

CON4 spoke of his 'love' for 'English common law ... a fantastic thing that's developed over time and recognizes how we really are rather than how we'd like to be.' Paradoxically, then, these participants framed power as simultaneously elusive and amenable to empirical observation. Moreover, elusiveness was sometimes implied to be a constitutive feature of elitism. The Bullingdon Club that had been so central to left-wing accounts of power was dismissed by CON6 as 'a toff's club for students' with little power relative to the 'secret societies' who really ran the world. On this telling, Bullingdon members' visibility in public life was indicative of their *lack* of power. Contra the clear and consistent elites described by most left-wing participants, among conservatives and liberals the elite concept seemed closer to Laclau's classic account of the elite as an empty signifier (see Chapter 3.2) that 'signifies everything and yet nothing' simultaneously (Norval 1994:120).



#### 6.2.4 Conspiracy: 'six people ... pulling the strings'

A significant minority of conservatives gave conspiratorial accounts of the elite. These implied that elite power was not just mysterious—but intentionally, and thus deceptively so. However, again departing from the structural analysis favoured by most on the left, these participants tended to consider the apparent cohesion of elite actions and interests the result of active collusion between elite agents. CON6 gave what I judged to be the most conspiratorial of the thirty-six accounts examined by this thesis. During the image task, he presented a gold ring featuring a logo associated with freemasonry (Figure 15). He argued that the freemasons and other 'secret societies' were the 'real elite' whose hidden influence drove the actions of ostensibly powerful governments and was intentionally obscured from public view.

**Figure 15. Elite conspiracy**

Masonic ring, CON6



For CON6, the secret societies that ran the world included 'the Skull and Bones, the Freemasons, [...] and the biggest one of all the Bilderbergs'. CON6 stopped short of the overt antisemitism expressed by LAB4 in Chapter 5.2, but his description of the Bilderberg group contained several antisemitic tropes including references to the Rothschild banking family. A second oblique reference to clandestine Jewish influence over world events arose during a discussion of the Kennedy assassination, after I had referred to the vigilante who shot and

killed Lee Harvey Oswald by his given name 'Jack Ruby.' CON6 quickly countered, without elaboration, that Ruby had been born 'Jacob Rubinstein,' a surname of Yiddish origin common among Ashkenazi Jews<sup>52</sup>.

Although less invested in conspiratorial folklore regarding freemasonry, Jewish banking families and alternative history, CON2 also gave a conspiratorial account of the 'sinister' elite power said to control governments from 'behind the scenes.'

I don't think [government] is where the real power lies anyway. I feel there's a more sinister influential sort of power behind the government. That's where the real power lies. It may be that there's six people just pulling the strings at the top saying this is what we want. And that's the conspiracy theorist in me coming out. CON2

CON2's references to 'real' power hinted at a dual perspective of the British establishment, where a genuine elite was somehow obscured by the presumably 'unreal' power held by public facing agents of government. It was also notable that, where left-wing participants had explicitly stated that 'conspiracy theories' were 'not necessary' to explain the patterned actions of elites, both CON2 and CON6 were happier to explicitly label their views as 'conspiracy theories.'

CON2 and CON6 gave what I considered explicitly conspiratorial accounts of elite power, but other conservatives sometimes gestured in the same direction. CON5 stated that they were 'not necessarily' a conspiracy theorist, but nonetheless alluded to a 'conspiracy theory' about the World Economic Forum widespread among members of her local party. The WEF's annual

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<sup>52</sup> Source: <https://forebears.io/surnames/rubinstein>.

conference at Davos was also mentioned by CON2, who linked the annual conference to 'the illuminati.'

You see it in the Dan Brown novels. The illuminati. It's the conspiracy theory coming back. They talk about Davos like oh we're having a big meeting. What about all the covert meetings that go on at dinner?'

Mediatized notions of 'the illuminati' were thus among the only elite archetypes to recur in multiple conservative conversations. However, it never arose among liberal participants. As data collection proceeded, I began to associate the conspiratorial outlook with an ambivalent mereological perspective on the elite wherein some conservatives appeared to equivocate between monist and pluralist frames.

This dual perspective is discussed in greater detail in section 6.3.2, where I posit that – rather than a straightforwardly monist or pluralist theory of the elite – CON2 and CON6's conspiratorial accounts conceived the elite via a combination of what Schaffer (2008) terms *existence* pluralism and *priority* monism (see Chapter 2.2). This dual perspective appeared to combine the themes of agency and elusiveness present in many conservative accounts. Which is to say that, by foregrounding conspiracy as the primary determinant of elitism, these participants effectively advanced an agency-based explanation of the elite's apparent elusiveness.

### 6.3 One or many? (RQ1b)

I have argued that conservatives and liberals generally considered elites agentic, multivalent and elusive. There was also a significant strand within conservative—but not liberal—accounts that framed elite individuals as united in an overt conspiracy. In elite theory terms, these themes converge on a broadly pluralist account of the British elite (see Chapter 2)—in which power was split between distinct individuals and groups. Although the mereological judgements made by left-wing and conservative/liberal participants were consistently distinct, the pluralist conservative/liberal consensus (if that is the correct word) was weaker than the monist consensus on the left. When monism did arise among conservatives, it did not resemble the structural monism favoured by Green and Labour members, but a distinct form of ‘conspiratorial monism.’ This section examines the mereological judgements made by conservative and liberal participants in two stages. First, I examine the straightforwardly pluralist elite concepts favoured by the majority. Second, I examine the dual perspective advanced by a significant minority of conservatives, that posited a monist ‘real’ elite hidden beneath the appearance of pluralist democracy.

#### 6.3.1 *Pluralism*

Most conservative/liberal participants favoured pluralist accounts of the elite. Where left-wing participants described a small number of definitive, overlapping elite identities – aristocratic, oligarchic, and sometimes metropolitan – conservatives and liberals cast their net wider to include celebrities, sportspeople, technologists, journalists, academics, philanthropists, employers, monarchs, and shadowy secret societies who were not necessarily felt to have much in common with each other. Alongside this heterogeneity, pluralism was also apparent in the tendency of conservatives and liberals to depict these distinct elites as inter-competitive factions. While left-wing participants never depicted distinct elite groups

during the image task, a quarter of the images presented by conservative/liberal participants depicted multiple elites.

This was most explicit in the original artwork presented by CON3, which he had titled *Lies, Damned Lies and Politics* (Figure 16). This image depicted a debate between a 'media elite' (holding a megaphone) and an 'academic elite' (wearing a mortar board). CON3 explained that academic attempts to educate the public were thwarted by the lies spread by media and political elites, with the help of economic elites who hoped that the ensuing debate might distract the public from their own machinations<sup>53</sup>. He thus constructed the British elite as a pluralised network of power centres each with distinct objectives, some more noble than others.

**Figure 16. Counter-elites**

*Lies, Damned Lies & Politics, CON3*



<sup>53</sup> CON3 was presenting his image to an academic, rather than a politician or journalist, which may have influenced this assessment.

Inter-elite competition was also present in the image presented by LIB4, which featured the logos of various social media companies, which he described as a fractured, competitive marketplace:

Fifty years ago you had one public broadcaster renowned for its independence and honesty. Now there are multiple sources of information and media, many of which spout forth conspiracy theories. ... There needs to be a trusted source that lays out the facts. LIB4

LIB4 spoke passionately about the deleterious – and apparently intentional – harms to journalistic standards done by platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, and Reddit which he said had inaugurated a ‘post-truth’ era of politics.

LIB4's critique notwithstanding, most conservatives/liberals saw pluralism as both an empirical reality and a social good. CON8 described the British elite as a ‘quasi-pluralist’ hierarchy where discrete power centres wield some amount of ‘influence,’ but only those with control over political institutions could be said to hold ‘power’ in the true sense of the term: ‘it's the politician who makes the decision, but [they] are influenced by ... newspapers, lobbyists on behalf of big or small businesses, trade unions, pressure groups, campaigns.’ For CON8, quasi-pluralism was both a desirable and accurate summation of Britain's elite.

However, he did not think that was anything necessary about the plural configurations, as he also noted that the form and relative position of elite groups tend to ‘fluctuate’ over time: ‘I certainly think that's how power should function. And by and large in the UK I think that is how power functions, with degrees of fluctuation.’ On this telling, the supremacy of political power was a contingent feature of twenty-first century Britain borne of centuries of parliamentary rule. Although these forces were likely to persist for the foreseeable future, they were not guaranteed to reign in perpetuity. CON8 felt there was always a chance that another

form of power might come to dominate, or at least disrupt, the power relations of British society.

CON4 gave a similar account that rejected the idea of a cohesive monist elite, describing how the apparently centralised power of government belied a complex web of 'organisations, quangos, and international bodies.' CON4 broadly approved of this model of power, feeling that a dispersal of powers produced 'an elected government with the authority to significantly change things, and also to be changed.' He explained that, while there were 'good practical reasons for wanting to do some things from the centre' the animating tendency of the British political system was to 'hive off large amounts of power from the centre to the different regions and localities.' A tendency to partition into ever smaller units was thus said to guide the evolution of power at the macro level of government, and also within the micro powers held by individual elites.

If you think about a minister making these decisions he's also got a family. A social group. He spends half his week going back between his ward and Westminster. Oh and by the way you're minister for the home office with responsibility for everything. How much time do you think they've got to focus?

CON4

Just as the powers invested in governments were therefore said to be divided between national, regional and local bureaucracies, the powers of government agents were spread between their various public and private roles, including their formal governmental positions and informal roles in their families and social networks.

CON7 also described power's capacity to split into multiple parts even when localised within an individual person. During his presentation of an oil painting of William the Conqueror<sup>54</sup>, CON7 described monarchic power as a 'trinitarian' construct consisting of the physical, psychic and symbolic forms of power discussed in Chapter 6.2.

The way I think about power is that there's almost like a kind of trinitarian thing to it. I'm kind of picturing a triangle with two points on the bottom and one on the top. The two on the bottom are about violence – a lot of power derives from violence ... with the crown representing the state as a sort of abstracted threat of menace and then obviously the sword which is slightly more direct imagery. But also the other kind of thing ... is the kind of almost like psychic, concerning the mind and the soul rather than mind control, ability and power to influence people. CON7

CON7's triangular metaphor was superficially reminiscent of the pyramidal social structures described by many left-wing participants, with the elite concentrated at the apex. However, CON7 did not depict elitism as a single part concentrated at one point within a social whole, as left-wing participants had done. Rather, his triangular analogy implied that power tends to split in at least three directions by its very nature. Elitism was here conceived as internally differentiated, containing distinct components liable to pull in different directions even when located within a concrete individual like William the Conqueror. CON7's 'triangular' model notwithstanding, conservatives and liberals used fewer spatial metaphors than left-wing participants to represent the elite. This may have been because their favoured plural model was less amenable to metaphor than the monism common in left-wing accounts.

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<sup>54</sup> King William I ('The Conqueror') by Unknown artist, oil on panel, 1597-1618, NPG 4980(1) © National Portrait Gallery, London.



Some participants dispensed with metaphor altogether, and instead made explicit allusions to 'pluralism.' LIB1 argued that Britain's elite was 'spread across' at least four distinct power centres:

At any one time there's about five hundred people running the country spread across church, state, business, academia, whatever. And five to ten years later it'll be a different five hundred people. Because the next person is always ready.

LIB1

LIB1's perspective suggested that the elite's mereological form was in constant flux. Naturally, in so fluid and multifaceted a system, power could never be identified with any particular person or group. Rather, at any one time, it was spread across 'about five hundred people.' For LIB1, the great virtue of British pluralism was the transience granted by its constant transformation. On this telling, the five hundred people in power at any given time were unlikely to pursue purely self-motivated ends because they were aware that their time at the top was finite. LIB3 gave a similarly explicit assessment of Britain's dispersed, plural elite configuration:

So to me, those people who are plugged in [to the elite], who are those people? I think they walk in all different areas of life. I don't think it's just one. You might come across an amazing teacher/police officer, someone whose done work on themselves so they realise it's not all about them. LIB3

Conservatives and liberals thus made it quite clear that their mental model of the elite consisted of many parts, rather than one. Indeed some explicitly argued against a monist notion of power.

Asked whether different forms of power existed in British society, CON4 responded with some consternation: 'well of course there are different kinds of power yeah. Political power, judicial power, economic power. Of course there are. Do you think society doesn't have power structures or something?' The same question prompted a similar response from CON7. When I suggested that top-down, structural power of monarchy as an alternative explanation for William's mastery of the three forms, CON7 responded:

'No I don't like that at all. The idea that there is always a place in a society from which power ultimately flows. I think that's completely wrong. The story of human history is the story of countervailing interests. I think it's particularly acute in this country. ... The existence of war as a human act betrays the fact that power is multifarious.' CON7

Taken together, the personalistic focus on agency, statements about power's internal differentiations, and references to inter-elite competition suggested that conservatives and liberals held a straightforwardly pluralist view of Britain's elite. However, this consensus was weaker than the monist consensus on the left. This was mainly because of the tendency of some conservatives (but not liberals) to construct a dual perspective that equivocated between monist and pluralist conceptions of the elite.

### *6.3.2 A dual perspective*

Of the four themes I inferred from conservative/liberal accounts, the first three – agency, multivalence, elusiveness – add up to a straightforwardly pluralist model of the elite. However, the fourth – conspiracy – contained a significant monist component that concentrated power within a small 'cabal' of powerful agents hidden beneath the apparent façade of Britain's notionally pluralist democracy. To explain how the agentic and multivalent British elite was controlled from a central point, it was necessary to posit the existence of secret social

networks through which the Bilderberg group, Skull & Bones and the World Economic Forum (etc) could co-ordinate their activities. This conspiratorial form of monism was contingent on collusion between the individual elites that populate the decentralised network of power centres in British society.

CON6 offered the following, unmistakably monist account of the Bilderberg group, organisers of an annual off-the-record meeting between Euro-American elites (Balevic 2024), who CON6 described as the secret controllers of 'every banking family' and 'most of the politicians.'

Oh yes they are unified in their goal course they are. They have secret meetings with VIPs. No minutes are taken. Industrialists in America. The Rothschild family. Every banking family really in America is sort of involved and most of the politicians. David Cameron went and point-blank refused to tell his party what was discussed. They're setting the trend for things that are going to happen in the next four to five years after the meetings. CON6

Where left-wing participants described a monist elite united by incentives aligned by structural forces, the conservative emphasis on agency made active collusion seem a more plausible explanation. However, it is not quite right to say that these participants abandoned pluralism for a conspiratorial form of monism. Rather, their conception of the elite operated at two distinct levels. On the surface, the appearance of a pluralist democracy was maintained by the visible elite agents of British public life.

Behind the scenes, however, the preferences of an elusive monist 'cabal' were the real driving force of history. CON2 thus distinguished between Britain's ostensible government and:

That more sinister influential sort of power behind the government that puts pressure on, by people that appear to be elite because they have that power

that wealth that influence. And there are various stages of that. So the whole elite picture is different depending on which aspect you're looking at it from.

CON2

Their closing sentence suggested that CON2 was quite consciously shifting between incommensurate perspectives on the elite, while references to 'sinister ... power behind the government' and 'people that appear to be elite' suggested that something about the elite was not just elusive but duplicitous. This dual perspective on the elite was simultaneously monist and pluralist.

A dual perspective was also apparent in the illustrative comparisons between elites and non-elites drawn by CON2 and CON6. Comparisons to non-elites were rare among conservatives, whose pluralist model did not facilitate easy one-to-one comparisons. Where left-wing participants frequently compared the elite to non-elite *groups* such as 'the working class,' conservatives preferred to compare the interpersonal styles of elite and non-elite *individuals*. CON6 drew several comparisons between individual members of the non-elite public and 'the billionaires.' CON2 likewise described interactions between wealthy tourists and service staff he had observed during cruise ship holidays.

That's another elite thing, there's a poor side of an elite. We do a lot of cruises my wife and I, and you see among the cruise passengers. The way they talk to the waiters. Just totally diminishes them. Like oh take that away I don't want that. ... I don't think a normal person would necessarily treat somebody like that.

CON2

These comparisons between elites and 'normal people' recalled comparisons made by participants who favoured monist accounts of the elite, wherein the elite was considered cohesive enough to permit comparisons with other social strata. However the implication that

elites have a 'poor side' – and, presumably then, a 'good side' – implied multivalence and therefore pluralism.

CON2 and CON6 were also unique among conservative participants in that they both used Occupy-style percentages to refer to the elite. Percentages are by their nature a relative metric, and their use here implies that elite status derives from differential power relations between elites and non-elites. However, where left-wing participants typically distinguished 'the one' from 'the ninety-nine percent,' CON2 and CON6 both alluded to 'the eighty percent' and/or 'the eighty/twenty rule' (CON6). It was tempting to link these turns of phrase to the Pareto principle (Juran 1941), an economic maxim also known as 'the 80/20 rule' inspired by Vilfredo Pareto, a chief progenitor of pluralist elite theory (see Chapter 2.2). However, even here, CON2 noted that the powers held by 'the twenty percent' were liable to splinter between distinct factions: 'politics itself is almost like kindergarten. I'm not helping them because they didn't help me type of thing.' The conspiratorial view thus appeared contingent on a dual perspective of the elite as monist and pluralist simultaneously. Or, in Schaffer's (2008) terms (see Chapter 2.2), an elite characterised by the co-existence of existence pluralism and priority monism.

## 6.4 Discussion

Conservatives and liberals broadly converged on a pluralist account of Britain's elite. However, their consensus was weaker than the monist consensus on the left. The four main themes inferred from conservative/liberal accounts tell the story. A focus on personal agency suggested the elite was a loose aggregation of powerful individuals rather than a cohesive group. The broad range of valences applied to those individuals further implied that each one was functionally and normatively distinct, while their elusiveness meant there was no single point in society where elitism could definitively be said to reside. Instead, power was understood to be unequally dispersed between multiple centres (Dahl 1961). Taken together, these themes produced a Who's Who elite (Smith 2024) populated by largely-autonomous

politicians, journalists, philanthropists, technologists, academics, soldiers, footballers, masons and monarchs. However, this pluralist model was weakened by the final theme—conspiracy. A significant minority of conservatives posited the existence of secretive networks linking the decentralised nodes of the British elite together, and thus bound elite agents together within a monist framework. This conspiratorial mindset constituted a dual perspective of the elite as an authoritarian monist cabal hidden beneath the surface-level appearance of a pluralist democracy.

This section explores the theoretical and political implications of these themes. First, I examine how the absence of a unifying elite archetype contributed to the elastic and multivalent nature of conservative and liberal elite conceptualisations. Second, I analyse the predominance of agency over structure in these accounts and its paradoxical relationship to anti-democratic rather than populist sentiments. Finally, I consider how the blurring of empirical and ontological folk mereology (Schaffer 2008) may have predisposed some participants toward conspiratorial thinking that ultimately facilitated populist discourse.

There was no unifying model tying conservative and liberal accounts together. That is, no equivalent to *The Bullingdon Club*, which was consistently invoked by left-wing participants to capture all the structural advantages enjoyed by Britain's ruling class in a single image (see Chapter 5). There was apparently no single nodal point to represent the elite within the mental maps of society held by conservative/liberal participants, and conservative and liberal accounts were therefore much more elastic. The 'pluralist consensus' noted above is, then, something of an oxymoron. It may be more correct that conservatives and liberals were unified by a shared commitment to dissensus. This heterogeneity dovetailed with a broader ideological fluidity among conservatives and liberals, evident in the proportions of participants who had held memberships of other parties in the past (a quarter of conservatives/liberals compared to an eighth of left-wing participants).

The absence of a unifying archetype seemed to influence how conservatives and liberals evaluated elites normatively. It was not that left-wing participants were critical and conservatives/liberals universally supportive of elitism. The key difference was rather that left-wing participants tended to judge the elite as a whole (usually negatively). Conservatives and liberals were more willing to disaggregate the elite into its component parts, and thus offer distinct assessments of powerful individuals and groups. Compared to the left, their elite concepts were thus more indicative of Nairn's (1964:17) 'cultural tissue of great variety and subtlety.' At times the elite appeared so subtle that it was difficult to grasp. Some even found it difficult to bring a unified image of the elite to mind. Insofar as it could be said to exist, the elite was either hidden from sight or, like the horizon, liable to recede into the distance if we attempt to approach.

Conservatives and liberals did not typically see the elite as a forest, then, but judged each tree on its own merits. This individualistic approach reflected conservatives' and liberals' stronger emphasis on elite agency than the structural forces emphasised by left-wing participants, and had several downstream effects. Elites were described using positive, negative and neutral valences—sometimes as 'paragons of virtue,' sometimes abusers of power, and sometimes as 'facts of life' inevitable in any society. Power was not necessarily seen as malign. As with left-wing participants, the elite was described in more positive terms by those who identified their families as elite, possibly as a means of pacifying dissonant feelings of hypocrisy or guilt.

Where elitism caused harm, this was usually attributed to immoral actions by powerful individuals. The solution was not to curb elitism *per se* but to replace bad elites with good elites, ideally through 'meritocratic' means. That said, some conservatives appeared indifferent to 'bad' elitism—moral failings could be tolerated if elites 'got the job done' by providing employment, innovation, or leadership that non-elites might aspire to emulate. Apparently less concerned about ideological coherence, several were happy to credit the achievements of elite figures they otherwise held in poor esteem, and to admire the personal

attributes of their 'competent' political opponents. Otherwise-undesirable ends could apparently be justified by their means.

More likely to believe that powerful individuals merited their elite status, conservatives and liberals thus appeared less averse to social hierarchy than their left-wing equivalents. However, somewhat paradoxically, their accounts were less structural and less structured than those from the left. Indeed the one thing that conservatives and liberals did agree on was that elitism is primarily a matter of agency. Some thus believed that 'everyone' could become an elite if they were able to recognise and maximise their inherent skills. The inverse of this belief was an occasional derision expressed about non-elites who refused to 'get off their backsides and work' and/or 'meet us halfway' – with 'us' here referring to those nearer the top of society trying to help non-elites achieve their full potential.

This personalistic account of power extended to conservatives' and liberals' understanding of their own place in society. Conservatives were less likely to attribute themselves a structural position within society. Two thirds responded 'none' or 'not sure' to the class identity item on the demographic questionnaire, compared to just a fifth of left-wing participants. Structure was only rarely invoked to explain 'centralised' concentrations of political power, and many conservatives (and some liberals) actively defended the structural advantages enjoyed by some elites. These included the hereditary privileges of the Bullingdon Club. Indeed some considered the Bullingdon archetype an ironic source of national pride, part of a patriotic imaginary that also included captains of national sports teams, military personnel involved with the Dambusters raid, and so on. Others expressed admiration for specific Bullingdon members (by name). Unlike the left-wing participants featured in Chapter 5, conservatives and liberals did not experience establishment stereotypes as 'a tradition of the dead generations weighing like a nightmare on the brain of the living' (Nairn 1964:19).



At times, I detected a dark side to the focus on agency and personal attributes, which underlay several anti-democratic statements that sought to empower individual elites at the expense of mass publics. These were usually advanced by those I considered 'mainstream' conservatives. CON4, CON5, and CON7 each argued that British society would benefit if democracy were 'stripped back' (CON5) to re-empower Britain's faded establishment. All three held some manner of formal role within their local party (e.g. councillor, secretary). Admiration for elite powers of persuasion sometimes recalled Sloterdijk's (1983:489-490) analysis of the 'popular cynicism' cultivated by neoliberal society, and associates far right politics with the capacity to 'auto-suggestively' believe one's own statements irrespective of their truth value. I was reminded of this argument during CON5's defence of persuasiveness, particularly regarding her father's health (I'm confident that he's okay and therefore he is'). Moreover, personalistic accounts of power sometimes shaded into talk of 'bloodlines' and 'genetic' elitism—suggesting an unsettling racial analysis that was never quite given full voice.

Conversely, those conservatives who expressed explicitly populist beliefs (CON2, CON6) never made overtly anti-democratic statements. This finding poses a challenge to the ideational school of populism studies that frames anti-pluralism and authoritarianism as definitional aspects of populist discourse (Vergara 2020:231). Among the participants in this study, there seemed to be no correlation between anti-elitism and overt anti-democracy, at least when democracy was framed as limited to one's own national community<sup>55</sup>. The distinct moral judgements of elite individuals and groups were more compatible with the notion of 'counter-elites' discussed in Chapter 3.4 (Howard & Kenway 2015, Bill 2020). Several participants described inter-elite competition, while others made references to 'good' and 'bad' elites whose broader influence on society should be judged according to their personal morality.

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<sup>55</sup> That said, CON6 made several statements that implicitly denied political subjecthood to immigrants to the UK, discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

This multivalent approach meant that conservatives and liberals attributed an 'open texture' to the elite concept (Zannoni 1978:19). However, contra Du Gay's (2008) Keyser Sütze phenomenon, this did not appear to derive from a poststructuralist deconstruction of the concept, but its opposite. That is, a preference for empirical (rather than theoretical, structural) analysis of elite power. There were far fewer comparisons between elites and non-elites, as elitism was not felt to be a relative phenomenon contingent on differentials of power between distinct parts of society. Various conceptions of 'the people' were central to multiple images presented by left-wing participants (LIB2, LAB4, LAB13, LAB16, LAB18)—always depicted as an oppressed mass held down by unfavourable relations to the elite (see Figures 18, 19; Chapter 7.2.1). Conversely, non-elites only appeared in two conservative/liberal images—and then only as passive spectators of inter-elite competition (CON3) or active supporters of elite achievement (CON1).

The empirical elite concepts of conservatives/liberals thus referred primarily to visible power *centres* rather than abstract power *relations*. Given that poststructuralism attributes the meaning of a given concept to its relations with other concepts, it is unsurprising that conservatives and liberals thus attributed less definitive identities to the elite. The monism favoured by left-wing participants is better suited to the simple 'oppositions, contrasts and antagonisms' (Lefebvre 1974:39) constitutive of discursive meaning, as only monads can establish binary relations with other entities. This finding suggests an inverse relationship between pluralism and nodality. Plural conceptions of the elite were thus unable to establish the straightforward relations to other concepts that otherwise imbue the elite concept with meaning.

Indifference to all but the most visible aspects of social structure may then have contributed to the indefinite elite concepts constructed by conservatives and liberals. It may also explain the tension between conservative/liberals' consistent affirmation that their elite concepts were based on 'empirical' observation, and their simultaneous view that elite power was

'elusive' or 'intangible.' The 'dominant cultural norms' of British hegemony—say inequality, hierarchy, and the 'good chap' theory of government (Priestly 1986:117)—may thus have remained 'unmarked categories' in conservative and liberal analyses (Aiolfi 2023). Alternatively, these participants may have been aware of the 'terminal forms' of British hegemony, but supportive of them. Indeed CON4 and CON8 both expressed fondness for Britain's historical traditions, which they saw as a source of institutional legitimacy and continuity that any new elite would lack.

The theoretical implications of these findings become clearer when compared to the left-wing accounts detailed in Chapter 5. Where left-wing participants oscillated between empirical and ontological judgements about the elite, conservatives and liberals heavily favoured the empirical level. My questions were thus interpreted as being primarily about 'actual' elites and their attributes, with less mind paid to invisible structural forces. Indeed LIB1 gave the most ostensibly structural account of elitism among conservatives and liberals, situating power in the social, cultural and financial inheritances transmitted through elite family networks. Yet at the same time, his was also among the most emphatic explicit identifications of elitism with 'personal agency.' The factors I considered structural were not, it seems, considered so by LIB1. The emphasis on empirical observation of visible markers of power may then have biased conservatives and liberals away from structural and toward agentic explanations of power.

With structure de-emphasised, conservatives and liberals sought alternative—agentic—explanations for the otherwise inexplicable workings of power. Monism, when it arose, functioned according to a quite different logic than that described by most left-wing participants. The latter described monism as a product of structural forces, and pre-empted accusations that their monist model constituted a 'conspiracy theory.' Conversely, the significant minority of conservative monists happily declared themselves 'conspiracy theorists.' This was sometimes said in jest, but nonetheless suggested active collusion

between elite agents was the most plausible explanation for elite cohesion. I refer here to those conservatives (CON2, CON6) who conceived the elite as a cohesive group of conspirators hidden beneath a pluralist façade.

This dual perspective may have represented an attempt at accounting for elite cohesion without properly separating empirics from ontology—so that monism and pluralism were simultaneously overloaded onto the empirical level. For the structural monists on the left, these judgements tended to co-exist peacefully. However, conspiratorial monists felt there was something contradictory—indeed deceptive—about the elite's mereological duality. Crucially, both types of monism dovetailed with anti-elite sentiments, consistent with ideational theories that consider monism a core component of populist elites (see Chapter 3.1.1). However, of the two, conspiratorial monists were more likely to integrate their anti-elitism into an overtly populist discourse that pitted the elite against a (British, national) people.

These findings suggest a relationship between folk mereology and populism, and prompt two questions. First, if monism is a necessary component of populism as Mudde contends, and left-wing participants more likely to hold monist views of the elite, why is left-wing populism scarce in Britain's recent history? Second, if the elite concept's political implications depend partly on its mereological form, why did conservatives and liberals share a broadly pluralist model of the elite but diametrically opposed stances towards the anti-elite discourses of Brexit? Chapter 7 attempts to answer these questions by examining the relations participants constructed between the elite and the rest of society ('the people' and/or 'the other').

## 6.5 Conclusion

The findings detailed in Chapter 6 complete my response to RQ1 – 'how do Red Wall residents conceptualise the elite?' Conservative and liberal participants constructed a highly varied

account of elite power, characterized by individual agency, moral ambiguity, elusiveness and conspiratorial machinations. Their accounts depicted multiple autonomous elite spheres – including business, politics, philanthropy, academia, and entertainment – populated by high-achieving individuals whose power derived primarily from personal attributes like charisma, competence and leadership ability. Claims that the elite were both elusive and amenable to empirical observation suggested a possible disconnect between the existence and priority levels of mereology, discussed in Chapter 2.2 (Schaffer 2007).

To reconcile this gap, some conservatives constructed a dual perspective of the elite as a monist conspiracy hidden behind a pluralist façade. The heterogeneity of conservative and liberal accounts appeared to enable a wider range of political narratives than the straightforward antagonisms favoured by the left, including some that cast certain elites as protagonists rather than villains. This finding is consistent with the greater tendency of right-wing populisms to oppose some elites while supporting others (see Chapter 3.4). A plural model of the elite may allow for the construction of elastic, semi-permeable frontiers between elite and people. Some elites can then be grouped in with the people, while others are situated within the boundary of a hated 'other.' Elite pluralism thus facilitates the construction of selective populisms that are simultaneously pro- and anti-elite without contradiction. Having examined how participants across the political spectrum conceptualise the elite, Chapter 7 explores the political implications (RQ2). The chapter examines how mereological judgements about elite power influenced participants' broader political worldviews, particularly their construction of 'the people,' 'the other,' and their notions of social justice.

## Chapter 7. Political implications of the elite concept: a discourse analysis

### 7.1 Introduction

Chapters 5 and 6 established how thirty-six politically active Red Wall residents conceptualise the elite (RQ1). Left-wing participants consistently constructed the British elite according to a neo-aristocratic archetype said to hold a monopoly over the country's politics, economy, land and institutions. This monist analysis of Britain's elite primarily identified elite cohesion with the alignment of incentives pursued by its members. There was a weaker pluralist consensus among conservatives and liberals. With some exceptions, they described the British elite as a decentralised set of autonomous high-achievers in many social domains. These included politics and the economy, but also the media, military, technology, philanthropy, academia, masonry, monarchy and sport among others. Conservatives and liberals tended to think these power centres largely independent of each other. However, a minority alleged that shadowy forces 'pulled the strings' of governments and other institutions from 'behind the scenes.' This represented a dual account of the elite as a monist conspiracy hidden beneath a pluralist façade.

Chapter 7 examines the political implications of the elite concepts constructed by participants (RQ2). As was discussed in Chapter 4.2.1, this means expanding my analysis beyond the elite concept, to consider how participants situated the elite within the 'families' of concepts that make up their political ideologies (Freedden 1994:160). The chapter splits this analysis into two main sections. Drawing on a bespoke version of Laclau & Mouffe's poststructuralist discourse analysis<sup>56</sup> (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), I first examine how participants partitioned the elite from 'the people' and 'the other' (RQ2a), and then the influence of these partitions on participants' wider political thought (RQ2b). That is, the influence that conceptions of the elite, the people,

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<sup>56</sup> Encompassing the concepts of folk mereology (Rose & Schaffer 2017) and order relation (Badiou 2014) detailed in Chapter 4.3.

and the other played when participants were asked to give their views about political matters. I examine participant reasoning about the vertical (populist-elitist) and horizontal (left-right) dimensions of political thought discussed in Chapter 2.3 (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017).

On the vertical dimension, populist sentiment was strongest among participants who conceived the elite as one and many simultaneously. I argue that this dual perspective allowed the elite to function as both a nodal point and an empty signifier in discourses associated with the 2016 Brexit referendum, suggesting that populist renderings of the elite concept depend on the same 'choreography ... between part and whole' that sustains populist ideas about 'the people' (Stavrakakis 2020:10). On the horizontal dimension, drawing on Badiou (2014), I argue that monist accounts of the elite shared an elective affinity with egalitarian politics quite irrespective of participants' political orientation. Building on Zannoni's (1978) analysis of elite semiotics and 'the problem of distribution,' I contend that monism introduces a conceptual order to political discourse that facilitates the part/whole analysis Bobbio (1994) considered a prerequisite of distributive justice.

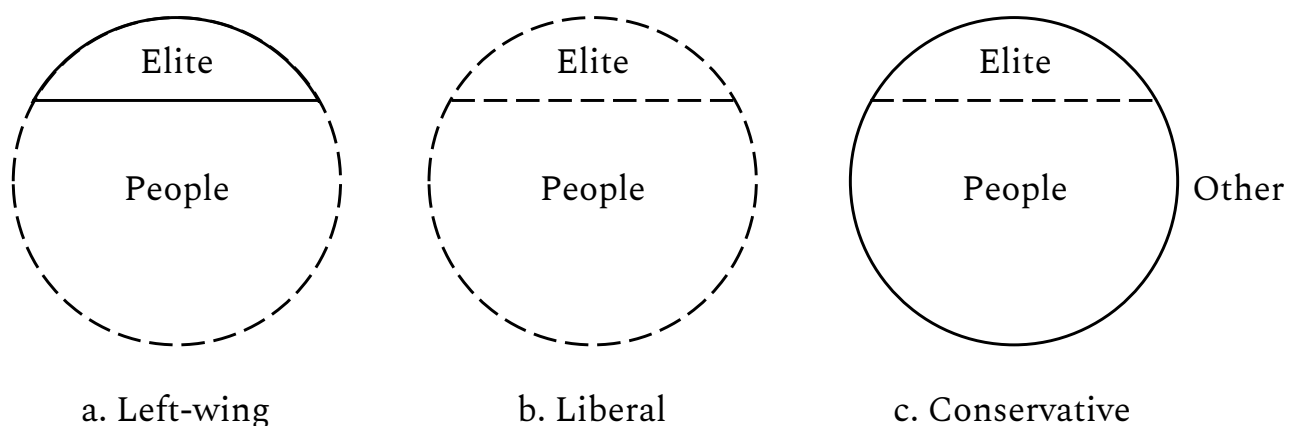
## **7.2 How did participants partition the elite from the people and the other? (RQ2a)**

Discourse theory holds that conceptual meanings arise primarily from relations between concepts, rather than concepts themselves (Saussure 1912, Barthes 1975, Foucault 1972, Laclau & Mouffe 1985, Laclau 2005a). Where the thematic analysis detailed in Chapters 5 and 6 focused on the explicit themes present in my conversations with participants, discourse analysis traces the implicit relations agents conceive between concepts (like 'the elite') and examines their logical implications for thought and practice (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000). The bespoke form of discourse analysis applied here combines this relational understanding of social reality with Rose & Schaffer's (2017) concept of folk mereology, which describes how lay people conceive the part/whole relations that structure their physical and social environments (see Chapter 1.3). This decision was taken because the elite is a fundamentally

mereological concept. That is, one that necessarily forms just one part of a larger whole that also includes non-elites. As such, it is not possible to construct an elite without saying something about its part/whole relations with the society of which it is a part, which also includes 'the people'. The boundary drawn around that society reveals something about our conception of those who reside outside of society's boundary ('the other').

These part/whole relations are more constitutive of the elite concept than any other, and must take centre stage in a discursive analysis of the elite concept's role in political thought. Because the 'mental maps' constituted by these relations attempt to represent the whole of social reality, they are highly revealing of the discursive 'terrain' in which participants constructed their political worldviews during our conversations (Laclau 2005b:1). Figure 17 depicts the mental maps of society that were thus constructed by each partisan public that participated in this study. Dotted boundaries indicate where they described relations of equivalence, and solid boundaries relations of difference between elite, people and other (see Chapter 4.3).

**Figure 17. Elite concepts constructed by partisan publics**



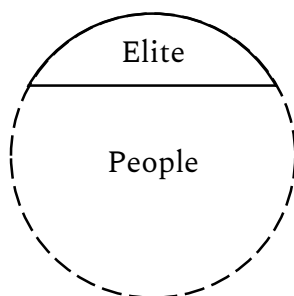
On the left, the monist elite was sharply distinguished from the rest of society (Fig 17a). However, these participants often minimised distinctions between the people and the other



by affirming an 'internationalist' solidarity against the elite. Society thus resembled a binary contest between elites and non-elites. Liberals minimised the distinctions between all three categories (Fig 17b). They also affirmed an internationalist identity but tended to construct the elite as a potential ally to the people-other alliance. Here society resembled a single overlapping plurality free of borders and collective identities. Conservatives tended to equivalise the British elite and people into a single national community (Fig 17c). This elite-people pair was sharply differentiated from the other. This nationalistic conception of society pitted Britain (or sometimes 'England') against the elites and others from outside its borders.

Figure 17 represents the part/whole assessments I inferred from my conversations with members of each partisan public. However, participants did not, of course, adhere to these assessments absolutely. Members of each group bent the rules implied by these mental maps of political reality, sometimes beyond their breaking point. Notably, the dual perspective of the elite constructed by a minority of conservative participants (see Chapter 6.3) resembled a combination of the left-wing and conservative mental maps depicted in Fig 17a and 17c respectively, producing an exclusionary form of egalitarianism that CON6 termed 'One Nation Conservatism.' Drawing on verbatim excerpts, this section describes how participants constructed each set of relations. The next examines their implications for participants' political thought

### 7.2.1 *Left-wing*



The part/whole relations constructed by left-wing participants had two main characteristics. First, a sharp distinction was drawn between the Bullingdon elite and the rest of society. This was evident in the frequent binary comparisons that left-wing participants drew between the elite and non-elites, which were

present in a quarter of left-wing presentations during the image task. The non-elites depicted

included 'the working class,' 'the grassroots people' and 'real life people.' By contrast, non-elites featured in just one image presented by conservatives and liberals, and only then as passive spectators of a debate between multiple elite groups (CON3). Figure 18 shows one of these images, a 1937 photograph popularly known as 'Toffs & Toughs' presented by LIB2. It contrasts an upper-class group of children wearing 'top hats, tails and canes worn with a stiff upper lip' against another group with 'scuffed shoes and mismatched garments [...] worn with a smile' (LIB2). The clothes worn by the eponymous 'toffs' is the uniform of Harrow College, an historic rival of Eton. The image situates the Bullingdon archetype within a binary comparison, and employs the visible markers of privilege embodied by the Harrow students to accentuate their distinction from the rest of society.

**Figure 18. Toffs & Toughs**

LIB2



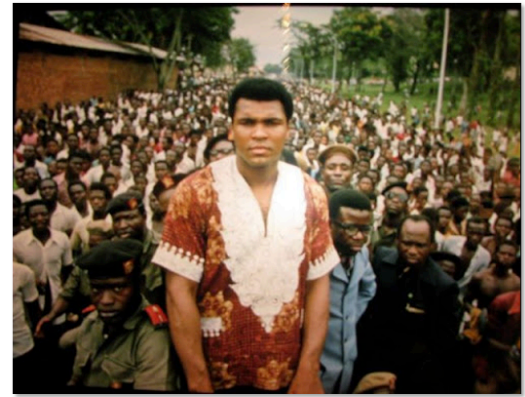
A further five images also drew binary comparisons between elites and non-elites. These included the cover art from the 1960 novel *A Clockwork Orange* (Fig 19b), chosen because the story 'epitomises the way working class people are treated by people in power' (LAB16). LAB4 contrasted 'the grassroots people with nothing' (LAB4) stood to Muhammad Ali and then-President of Zaire Mobutu Sese Seko (Fig 19c).

**Figure 19. Elites vs. non-elites**

a. Hot Air  
LAB18



b. A Clockwork Orange  
LAB16



c. Mobutu, Ali & the people  
LAB4

Participants sometimes implied that these comparisons were not merely illustrative, but *constitutive* of elite status. LAB18, a woman in her early sixties, explained that image of the elite as a hot-air balloon floating away from 'real life' (Fig 19a) was supposed to represent how:

[The elite] pushes up but at the same time pushes real life down. ... They couldn't go up unless they were pressing down. They're pushing down to help them stay up. We're not aware of it in everyday life but it's always there in society. ... It's an interesting link between philosophy and physics how your own morality effects and presses on others. If you've got limited resources there's an equal and opposite force isn't there. LAB18

LAB18's presentation framed elitism as a zero-sum game wherein every elite advance produced an 'equal and opposite force' that suppressed the life chances of non-elites, with the same logical certainty as physics. LAB4 similarly stated that 'there is a big gap between the poor and rich. And when that happens *we are creating an elite*' (emphasis added). Elite status was thus a product of hierarchic, dyadic relations between the elite and the rest of society.

These comparative accounts framed elitism as a relative phenomenon, wherein elite status was only meaningful insofar as non-elites were less fortunate. LAB8 initially cited their whiteness as a marker of elitism, but qualified that the high relative proportion of white males in the British population disqualified race and gender as markers of elitism.

I went to a Russell Group university. That's elite isn't it. I'm a barrister and a member of a political party. I'm a white male. Although that's not really an elite. White males are forty-eight percent of the census. The elite can't be that numerous. LAB8

Binary distinctions between elites and non-elites may have represented a variant on a phenomenon identified by Savage (2015), wherein British publics to accentuate the stereotypes at the extremes of the British class structure – the elite and the precariat – so that they themselves might appear 'ordinary' by comparison.

The second part/whole relation constructed by left-wing accounts was the permeable boundary around the people. This meant there was no definitive divide between people and other, who were often described as allies in an all-or-nothing contest between elites and non-elites. This was evident in statements made in support of 'internationalism' that effectively merge people and other into a single category. LAB18 counterposed the exclusionary logics of Brexit against childhood memories in Switzerland, where her father was employed at an international research laboratory.

I lived in Switzerland until I was seven and I met people from all over the world because they were there for the purpose of research and all the rest of it and they became equals in that. ... It wasn't about proving you were in the elite it was about sharing. And that internationalism comes back to it. I'm not more than them, and they're not more than me. LAB18

The closing sentence erased all distinctions between people and other by declaring that neither is more or less than the other. In discursive terms, LAB18 thus constructed a relation of equivalence between the people and the other. Moreover, her contention that her father's role 'wasn't about proving you were in the elite' implied a relation of difference wherein the people-other alliance would be compromised by the presence of the elite. For Mouffe (2005:60), this would indicate that the elite represents the limit of the internationalist identity. The two camps are thus mutually constitutive outsiders.

LAB1, a man in his late twenties, also constructed a people-other alliance against the elite:

I'm still reading Marx's work, but it is making sense when I look at the world through that lens. ... Cultural lines make people think they have less in common than they do. Whatever other differences, if you're both workers you have more in common with each other than you ever do with the factory owner. ... The reason I'm struggling isn't because of a person coming over to the UK on a dinghy, or because a trans person wants to get surgery. It's the fact that wealth is being hoarded by the wealthy. And that's where we need to direct our anger. Can you give up just a bit of that wealth so we can afford to house homeless people and feed the hungry? And if they say no, say well we're going to do it anyway because we as the collective have more capacity to do that than you. LAB1

Through a growing familiarity with socialist literature, LAB1 sought to erase 'cultural lines' that separated 'we, the collective' from otherised groups who either originated from outside the people or departed from the people's heteronormative ideal. This 'collective' was highly inclusive but not universal. Even as it blurred the boundary between people and other, it explicitly excluded and indeed scapegoated the 'factory owner' elite depicted as the source of the people-other's misfortune. This not-quite maximally inclusive discourse had an interesting second order effect wherein left-wing participants frequently described the people

as somehow 'fragmented.' This conception of the people did not appear substantial enough to serve as a 'lived' identity. For instance, although left-wing participants often constructed the people as a class subject, references to 'the working class' were typically made from a third-person perspective.

The only collective occasionally referred to using first/second-person pronouns was the 'Northern people.' This suggested that left-wing participants identified more directly with notions of place than class. Left-wing participants tended only to identify with a people when doing so entailed an antagonism toward an elite and/or a defence of an oppressed other. Indeed they rarely subscribed to a unitary notion of *the* people at all. LAB7 felt that British society contained a plurality of peoples distinguished by their gender, ethnicity, sexuality and class:

You want to break down the barriers to women, black people, gay people and you can see working class people as another label to add to the list. And when you do that you can have an impact on the broader struggle for equality. LAB7

Left-wing participants sometimes expressed sadness or frustration at the apparent fragmentation of the non-elite 'people', which was generally considered an impediment to left-wing politics<sup>57</sup>. LAB2 described how the 'togetherness,' 'cohesion' and sense of 'society' he remembered from his youth had been lost in recent decades.

Some left-wing participants thus yearned for a unitary people identity, even as they sought to expand and pluralise that identity by minimising distinctions between people and other. This tension was apparent during my conversation with LAB13, who was sufficiently frustrated at a lack of 'common ground' among adherents to left-wing politics that they cast several envious

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. the perennial debate over whether the left's collective subject is best conceived as a universal class or plurality of peoples (Fraser 1995, Butler 1998, Rorty 2000, Laclau 2000, Honneth 2004, McCarthy & Desan 2023).

glances at the unitary ethno-national identities constructed by the British right, including the post-imperial collective subject that LAB13 associated with Brexit.

Religion and empire were joint identities about things we all accepted that are now gone ... and I would far rather we find a new identity. The NHS is the national religion. Most agree we can find common ground on the NHS. But the left don't even touch that. The right do. They talk about purpose all the time.

LAB13

This statement by LAB13 echoed the 'quasi-religious' framing of the NHS in Brexit discourses identified by Kettel & Kerr (2021:282). The British health service that was elsewhere cited as a beneficiary of Brexit was here evoked as a potential nodal point around which an egalitarian national identity might be constructed.

I have argued that left-wing participants constructed two main part/whole relations around the elite. The first sharply distinguished the elite from the rest of society, while the second blurred distinctions between people and other (Fig 17a). However, there were exceptions to these tendencies. LAB15 was unusual among left-wing participants in their strong rejection of categorical distinctions between elites and non-elites. Drawing on her experiences as a primary school teacher, she reflected that:

When I was a teacher I thought these words are just meaningless really. I mean how can you call a child working class and another middle class. It is utterly meaningless. ... I think people start to categorize too much and it keeps people in place, I mean imagine calling a group of people the upper class for Christ's sake! It's such emotive language. It also builds in an idea of aspiration where people want to aspire. I've often thought that when I was a kid, working class

conservatives wanted to aspire to be in that class. And that's half the problem I think with voting. You vote to be in the class that you want to get into. LAB15

This excerpt from LAB15 demonstrates that a belief in the potential of hierarchical class discourse to rally people behind an egalitarian politic was not universal on the left. Although she had earlier described British society using a pyramidal spatial metaphor that situated 'the working class at the bottom,' LAB15 clearly held ambivalent feelings about class and the subjectivities cultivated by class labels.

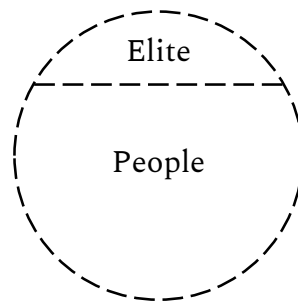
Moreover, her statement that people generally 'vote to be in the class that [they] want to get into' may also shed light on left-wing participants' tendency to advocate for 'the working class,' even as their questionnaire responses and use of third person pronouns revealed that few straightforwardly identified as working class themselves. For these participants, membership within a left-wing political party may have been a means of vicariously identifying with a working-class aesthetic they feared was otherwise absent from their day-to-day lives. The strong distinction drawn between elites and non-elites may then play an identificatory function for middle class voters on the left. If the extremes of the class structure are accentuated so that class identity becomes a binary choice, those upwardly mobile participants in the middle regions can reassure themselves that they are still closer aligned to the working class so long as they do not cross the threshold into 'the one percent.' Binary elite/non-elite distinctions may be, in part, a means of attenuating the cognitive dissonance experienced by some egalitarian-yet-wealthy participants, discussed in Chapter 5.2.

### *7.2.2 Conservatives & liberals*

In Chapter 6, I argued that most conservative and liberal participants shared a broadly plural model of the elite, noting that it was therefore puzzling that each group held distinct views of populism in general and Brexit in particular. In this section, I argue that conservatives and



liberals placed distinct conceptual boundaries around the plural elite (cf. Fig 17b 17c) which each entailed distinct political implications. Both groups constructed a permeable boundary between the elite and the people. However, each tended to treat 'the other' in characteristic ways. Liberals welcomed the other into the same inclusive discursive field as the elite and people, while conservatives tended to construct a hard border between the British elite-people and the 'others' from outside the country's borders. This section examines how these distinct part/whole relations were constructed by participants during our conversations, beginning with the borderless relations favoured by liberals (Fig 17b).



b. Liberal

Liberal participants tended to minimise partitions between elite, people and other, so that their accounts sometimes resembled the internationalism affirmed by many left-wing participants. However, where left-wing internationalism excluded the elite from 'we, the collective' (LAB1), liberals maximised the logic of equivalence by erasing boundaries between all three. For instance, asked whether Britain's elite had changed during their lifetime, LIB1's response suggested that members of both the working-class 'people' and immigrant 'other':

The elite is constantly renewing itself partly by taking bright people from the working classes and partly from international immigration. [There is] a lot of international transfusion of new blood into the elite from other countries getting involved here. LIB1

Statements of this type differed markedly from left-wing descriptions of the elite as a 'closed shop' (LAB13) with extremely high barriers to entry that impeded the social mobility of non-elites. Overt anti-elitism was thus rare among liberals, as their borderless political space contained no interstitial gaps in which political antagonism might cohere between elite, people and other.

This maximally inclusive space was summed up by LIB3. Asked how she would change Britain's elite if given the chance, LIB3 used the metaphor of degrees in a circle to represent the plurality of perspectives she hoped to draw together in a single 'collective.' 'Every part of a circle has a voice. ... To make a collective decision for the bigger picture we need to have all those voices from all those directions (LIB3).' There was no vertical antagonism against a hated elite here, as verticality was just one direction among many whose voice was required to bring the collective into being. By way of illustration, LIB3 told how she had visited the Patara Bouleuterion—a circular amphitheatre in present-day Turkey built by one of the world's first known democratic collectives in the second century BCE (Gill 2023). Upon visiting the site, LIB3 'just had this epiphany moment. I said we've got to bring people back to a circle. Our Houses of Parliament are split down the middle opposite each other. And there's part of me that wants to create a circular parliament where we're all equal.'

LIB3's desire for a borderless politics was shared by most of the liberals who participated in this study. LIB4 described how living and working in Africa for eleven years had played a central role in their transition from 'strident' conservative to liberal, as the experience undermined prior notions about distinct national cultures:

I was at one time a fairly strident conservative, but I grew up and got a bit more life experience and the liberal democrats best fit my philosophy. I spent eleven years as a foreigner in another country and that taught me a few things about equality. ... Being a foreigner in another country was quite the experience even

though I was part of the elite if you like. Being able to speak the lingo broadens your cultural experience and you get to understand them and their psychology by being able to tell jokes in their language. It was the making of me to be honest. LIB4

Like LIB3, LIB4's political subjectivity was thus predicated on the erasure of barriers between peoples that might otherwise be separated by national identity, culture and language. For both LIB3 and LIB4, the elite was not a constitutive outside of the other, as was implied by LAB18's stories about her childhood in Switzerland. Instead society had no boundaries—and therefore no outside, *and therefore no inside*. Indeed LIB4's account of his time in Africa told how he had ingratiated himself within an otherised culture despite his elite status. He did not claim that his integration was seamless, but that the experience had revealed to him that boundaries between elite, people and other are more permeable than they had previously appeared.

Conservatives also minimised distinctions between the elite and the people, but tended to separate the resulting national community from extranational others. The fuzzy boundary between elites and non-elites was evident during my conversation with CON1, who objected to rhetorical attempts to distinguish elite from non-elite sections of society: 'they stand up in parliament and say that policy doesn't work for the working man. Well what do they mean by the working man? Everybody who works is a working man, aren't they?' Asked whether the British elite shared a set of material interests, CON1 continued that he felt elites were 'just the same as everybody else.'

CON5 expressed a similar sentiment after she was asked to characterise 'the relations between powerful people and the rest of society:'

It's not a question I could probably answer very helpfully because I haven't thought about it enough. Because there's also a lot of competitiveness between

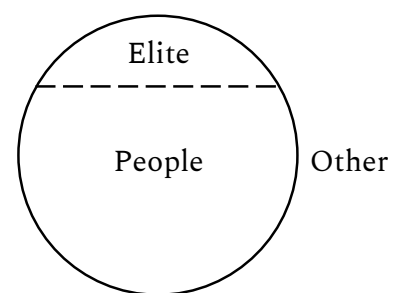
them. So it's working through how much is pulling in the same direction.

There's too much to think about there. I don't know if I know the answer to it.

CON5

This response implied that there were no persistent part/whole relations enjoining the elite to the rest of society, as those relations were always in flux. Her unprompted reference to 'competitiveness' indicated that – whoever the elite were – they did not occupy a unitary position in social space, nor adhere to a single set of interests. The relative absence of an elite/people boundary was also evident in the greater willingness of conservatives and liberals to identify themselves as elites. An unusually explicit example arose during the image task, when LIB1 presented an image of themselves performing charity work alongside a watercolour painting of allied soldiers fighting at Arnhem Bridge during the second World War – one of whom, he noted, was modelled on a distant relative of his. The painting was thus a source of national and familial pride, revealing that elitism was an explicit part of LIB1's self-identity (a notion that most left-wing participants appeared to find repellent).

Conservatives and liberals thus favoured a permeable border between the elite and the people. However, they were less aligned regarding the part/whole relation between the elite-people pair and the other. Contra the maximally inclusive liberal accounts discussed above, conservatives tended to distinguish the specifically British elite-people from the outside world. This was



c. Conservative

captured in the name of the 'One Nation conservative' philosophy affirmed by half of the conservative participants in this study (CON2, CON3, CON4, CON6). This was typically introduced as a benign, contemporary form of *noblesse oblige*, but often took on an exclusionary hue. CON6 'blamed' an apparent 'influx' of immigration on the Bilderberg Group – the shadowy elite cabal whom CON6 considered the most powerful in the world. Nationalism was clearly a core part of CON6's political identity. Indeed he objected—

mistakenly—that the demographic questionnaire sent to him before the interview had not allowed respondents to indicate that their nationality was English.

Other conservatives constructed a similar antithesis between the British (or sometimes English) 'people' and the other. CON4 was sceptical that the British people would prove able to assimilate immigrant populations 'at the levels of immigration that we're experiencing.'

It wasn't that long ago people that lived in French-speaking Canada decided they couldn't possibly be in the same country as English-speaking Canadians. Well the difference isn't that much compared to the differences we're trying to assimilate now which are huge. We've only just stopped the Catholics and Protestants killing each other in Northern Ireland. CON4

That sectarian struggles in Quebec and Northern Ireland were said to represent lesser differences than the 'huge' differences between British and South Asian communities seemed designed to racialize the distinction between people and other. Differences of language or religion were thus relegated below ethno-national differences between Britain and 'the south-east Asian community.' Moreover, the Northern Irish example seemed to imply that ethnic differences naturally lead to conflict, invoking civil war as a metaphor for relations between racialised groups.

An emphasis on fixed, place-based identities was further evident in CON4's decidedly anti-constructivist—view of regional identity. CON4 argued that attempts by central government to impose 'false' identities on Britain's ancient counties were bound to fail, presumably because they were incapable of trumping the 'genuine' regional identities imprinted on people by their place of birth:

England is not a country of regions. Spain is a country of regions, you know Andalucía is a genuine region. The north west of England is a line on a map. There's an affiliation to Lancashire, but I don't say I'm a North Westerner. The regions are a Whitehall construct. They are putting a false structure in. Nobody says I'm a west Midlander. They say I'm from Warwickshire and that's my identity. CON4

A veneration of nation was also apparent in the tendency of conservatives to conceive the elite as a cohesive whole to facilitate comparisons to elites in other countries, but rarely to compare with British elite with non-elites in the UK. Asked whether elitism functioned according to a similar logic wherever it arose, CON8 explained that their 'natural instinct is to compare the UK to other countries, and certainly I think the institutions in the UK are much stricter and more likely to be followed than other countries.' LIB1 likewise contended that 'the British system has a very good well dispersed elite' relative to 'countries like India or China' by virtue of an abundance of 'non-state actors with public presence who can provide balance and self-correction.'

In both of these conversations, the British elite was only conceived as a meaningful whole when considered as a part within an international system. When the elite was considered as an internal part of the British nation, the porous boundary that conservatives and liberals tended to construct between the British elite and the people (Fig 17b, 17c) appeared to impede comparisons between them.. In Laclau's (2005b:1) terms, the elite was only 'thinkable' when conceived within an international 'terrain.' Within a national frame, its partitions were not definitive enough to sustain one-to-one comparisons with other parts.

### 7.3 Implications for political thought (RQ2b)

I have argued that the left-wing, conservative and liberal publics who participated in this study constructed distinct elite concepts. The key distinction was the part/whole relations between elite, people and other that participants used to situate the elite in their mental models of society (Figure 17). Left-wing participants preferred a monist elite that was strongly differentiated from the people ('everyone but the elite'). Most conservatives and liberals preferred a plural elite dispersed across multiple social domains, but differed over how the elite was connected to the rest of society. Conservatives blurred the line between elite and people but conceived a hard border between the resulting national community and the other. Liberals minimised all these distinctions, preferring to see elite, people and other as overlapping, somewhat illusory categories. A significant minority of conservative party members took a dual perspective that drew on aspects of monism and pluralism, producing a conspiratorial account of elite power. This section examines the role that these inchoate mental maps of society played in participants' political thought.

Political thought is, of course, extremely complex—and an exhaustive analysis of participants' worldviews is functionally impossible. For the sake of brevity, I focus on the what I term the vertical (populist-elitist) and horizontal (left-right) dimensions of political thought (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017; discussed in detail in Chapter 4.2). On the vertical dimension, populist sentiment—specifically, support for Brexit—was strongest among those advanced a 'conspiratorial account' of a singular, authoritarian elite concealed beneath the appearance of pluralist democracy. On the horizontal dimension, monist accounts of the elite tended to accompany calls for elite resources to be redistributed among the wider population—quite irrespective of participants' party affiliation. This section discusses each dimension in turn. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of the implications for Brexit, the Red Wall and British society.

### 7.3.1 *Vertical politics: populism, elitism and Brexit*

Participants were asked to share their recollections of the notionally populist Brexit referendum campaign<sup>58</sup> during the ‘politics’ stage of the interview (see Chapter 4.2). The part/whole relations participants constructed between elite, people and other framed interpretations of populism and elitism in three main ways. First, left-wing participants felt that Brexit did not constitute a populist movement, because the ‘people’ constructed by Brexit discourse included several figures who resembled the elite Bullingdon archetype they identified with Britain’s elite (see Chapter 5.2). Second, despite sharing a broadly pluralist model of the elite, conservatives and liberals often held diametrically opposed views about Brexit, that appeared contingent on the relations each constructed between the people and the other. Third, Brexit support was strongest among participants who described a simultaneously-monist-and-pluralist elite (see Chapter 6.3).

The categorical binary distinction that most left-wing participants drew between elites and non-elites was not straightforwardly compatible with the ostensibly populist narratives articulated by Brexit supporters. These described the principal antagonist of Brexit as an elite-other alliance between the European Union and otherised immigrant populations. Left-wing participants thus struggled to make sense of the simultaneously anti-elite and anti-other discourse of Brexit. LAB1, who had earlier distinguished the ‘factory owning elite’ from an alliance of British workers and immigrants said to have ‘arrived by dinghy’ (see Chapter 7.2), explained his objections to Brexit:

The rhetoric was about immigration and healthcare but not about an elite class. It was more of an exclusionary class. Problems were scapegoated on to immigration, but I would always struggle to consider an immigrant class to be an elite class. LAB1

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<sup>58</sup> This is not, then, an analysis of anti-elitism as such, but rather of the particular form of anti-elitism expressed in discourses surrounding the Brexit referendum (Freedon 2017).



LAB1 clearly felt there was something nonsensical about the notion of an alliance between the other and the monist, oligarchic elite concept he perceived atop Britain's hierarchic social structure. The reference to an 'exclusionary class' suggested doubt regarding Brexit's claims to have been a 'populist' movement, on the grounds that anti-elitism was fatally diluted if a logic of equivalence enjoined the elite to an immigrant-other. In LAB1's estimation, the elite and the other were mutual antagonists that resisted amalgamation into a single category.

This view was shared by most left-wing participants. Indeed some expressed frustration at the left's apparent inability to relax its aversion to the elite-other alliance described in Brexit discourse, given that significant sections of the fifty-two percent majority that voted for Brexit apparently found it persuasive. LAB5 felt this had been particularly costly to Labour in the years immediately after the referendum, as the party failed to describe British society in a way that resonated with the apparent views of Brexit voters:

In all honesty we didn't see it as a problem. It was probably more a feeling that most immigrants were likely beneficial to the country. Not necessarily prepared to see the downside for some communities in terms of access to housing, healthcare, education. We took our eye off the ball really. And those voters deserted us. LAB5

LAB5 thus suggested that equivalence most left-wing participants drew between the people and the other was deeply sedimented within left-wing discourse such that it could not easily be discarded. Even when doing so might serve strategic ends.

If the alliance between elite and other posited by Brexit's proponents meant their movement could not be considered populist, many left-wing participants argued that Brexit was an elitist, rather than anti-elitist movement. I considered this an inversion of Brexit across the vertical dimension of political thought. LAB16, a woman in her early seventies, argued that Brexit's

populist pretensions provided cover for wealthy elites to profit from currency speculation and the programme of deregulation that some expected to follow the UK's cessation from the European Union:

The media had sold them the idea that Brexit would mean freedom from a Brussels elite or people in London. The elite in London running their lives for them. No it wasn't. Brexit was a method for freeing the UK so the people at the top could make even more money. LAB16

GRN3 concurred that Brexit was 'an example of intra-elite competition. A power grab by the Jacob Rees-Mogg elites against the EU elites.' LIB2 likewise blamed the referendum on 'a fanatical clique with the support of the popular press and its owners ... the bastards living luxuriously in off shore tax havens.'

These statements suggested that the part-whole relations favoured by left-wing participants influenced their assessment of the vertical antagonism said to have been expressed by Brexit. Unable to reconcile the Bullingdon-led 'people' of Brexit discourse with the impermeable barrier most had constructed between elites and non-elites, left-wing participants contested Brexit's status as a populist movement by altering the mental map of British society implied by the conventional Brexit narrative. This was either done by grouping Brexit's working-class supporters together with 'tax haven elites,' or dividing the British elite between well-informed experts who advocated Remain and cynical, xenophobic elites on the side of Leave. Both strategies constructed a pro-Leave elite-antagonist within the Brexit story, and allowed Remain to be reconciled with the anti-elitism that many left-wing participants considered central to their political identities (see Chapter 5.2). For many left-wing participants, Brexit was only coherent when re-framed within their favoured binary elite/non-elite model of power.

Part/whole relations also played a role in the Brexit sentiments of conservatives and liberals, whose Brexit views diverged sharply along party lines despite sharing a broadly pluralist model of the elite (see Chapter 6.3). Most conservatives supported Brexit to some extent, but liberals were invariably opposed – and often passionately so. The split appeared contingent on the distinct relations each group constructed between the people and the other. CON4, who earlier expressed concerns about Britain's capacity to 'assimilate' immigrants from South East Asia, argued that Brexit reproduced a political 'fissure' between voters rooted in a geographic place and those with internationally mobile life trajectories:

People call it the somewheres and the anywheres. People that are rooted in a place versus people that move on have a career in the Far East and come back to settle in London. They're just a completely different worldview now. Between the localist and the internationalist sort of you know. Not going to go through the whole Brexit thing again but the divide there was so clear. CON4

CON4 thus appeared to hold a dual perspective of Brexit. On one level, it was a contest between a British people and an other sometimes represented by 'the South Asian community' and/or 'the Far East.' At a second level, Brexit was a contest between two worldviews constructed around distinct people/other relations. That is, between 'internationalists' who were not tied to a particular ethno-national people, and 'localists' who were 'rooted in a place,' and thus conceived a dividing line between 'the people from here' (Ostiguy 2020:31) and 'others' from elsewhere. CON4 described his own Brexit support in terms that recalled Laclau's account of 'ethno-populism' (see Chapter 3.3) wherein 'the people ... cannot incorporate demands of immigrants and other minorities' (Laclau 2005a;196). For Laclau, ethno-populism does not construct an elite/people frontier inside a community, but an exterior frontier separating the nation from external others (Kim 2017:2).

Similar sentiments were shared by most conservatives, whose analyses of Brexit often invoked national sovereignty and territorial borders. CON1 argued that ‘long before there was a referendum this country was being disadvantaged in a number of ways because of our (sic) increasing impact of European legislation.’ The theme of ethno-nationalism was also present when CON6 pre-emptively defended his support for Brexit from accusations of racism. Asked at the close of the interview whether there were any topics he had expected to discuss which had not come up, he responded ‘I thought you might have cared about whether racism was a reason for Brexit. And I’m not racist in any way.’ This protestation notwithstanding, his response suggested that race was a sufficiently central node in Brexit discourse as understood by CON6 that he was keen to pre-empt accusations of racism for having voted Leave.

Self-described ‘moderate’ conservatives framed their Brexit support in more conciliatory tones, but still often alluded to national boundaries, sovereignty, and British identity:

I don’t necessarily think of the UK as a slave to EU bureaucrats or whatever.

But I do think there was a transfer of power to the UK as a result of Brexit. ...

We had sovereignty within the EU but there is a shift since the vote. CON8

Conservative support for Brexit was thus predicated on two aspects of the part/whole relations depicted in Figure 17c. The porous boundary between elite and people allowed some sections of the pluralist elite to lead the people, while the sharp distinction between British society and the other from beyond its boundaries allowed immigrant populations to be cast as the villains of the piece.

The maximally inclusive politics-without-borders constructed by most liberals also contained a fuzzy boundary between elite and people, but largely did away with the strong separation of the other (Figure 17b). Although they shared a broadly pluralist account of elite power with conservatives, their blending together of the people and other meant they interpreted the

vertical dimension of Brexit very differently. LIB3, who made a passionate case in favour of a borderless politics via analogy to the Patara Bouleuterion (see Chapter 7.2), described her opposition to Brexit as the prime motivating factor of her political identity. Asked how they came to be a liberal democrat, she explained that:

I was ranting a lot about Brexit and I couldn't understand what was going on ...  
I felt so cross about that, it just undermines all of our political institutions and how we're valued around the world. It just undermined everything, and it was so divisive to spill out lies to people ... if we just talked about Brexit we could fill up the rest of the interview (laughs). LIB3

LIB3's distaste for Brexit was expressed in supranational terms, as a blow to 'how we're valued around the world' that had caused 'divisions' in and outside of Britain. LIB3 thus articulated the positive case for the 'anywhere' side of the somewhere/anywhere fissure described by CON4 in Chapter 6.2, by arguing for a softening of borders and divisions with others from 'around the world.'

LIB4 also cited Brexit as a core component of their political identity in terms that stressed an internationalist outlook and the softening of borders:

I am a believer that we should all be working together not against each other. ...  
So that involves inclusiveness. People like me see the massive benefit of being part of a massive community of three hundred and seventy-five million people with open borders and free movement. LIB4

LIB4 continued that they were disillusioned by what he described as the Liberal Democrats' 'lukewarm' opposition to Brexit in the years since the referendum. He noted that the Scottish National Party was now closer to his personal views on EU membership, and that they 'might

vote for them if the border was at Penrith, which would put us inside Scotland.’ Although said in jest, the issue of Brexit again evoked notions of elastic, permeable borders in the liberal imaginary.

LIB1 shared his fellow liberals’ opposition to Brexit, and seemed to conceive the Leave/Remain divide in similar terms to CON4’s somewhere/anywhere analysis. However, they applied a distinct negative valence to this analysis as they framed Brexit as a bigoted expression of imperial nostalgia:

Misguided middle class people at the older end supported Leave out of nostalgia for the British empire. And I think the working-class corollary of that was quite strong. There has always been an imperialistic UK working class happy to be the empire’s foot soldiers. LIB1

LIB1’s objections were particularly notable as he was among the only anti-Brexit participants who expressed active patriotism—exemplified by the image of British soldiers at the Battle of Arnhem he had presented during the image task (see Chapter 6.2).

LIB1’s account demonstrated, therefore, that patriotism was not co-extensive with Brexit support. His account is therefore potentially key to explaining why conservatives and liberals broadly shared the same, pluralist folk theory of the elite, but held very different views about anti-elite rhetoric. LIB1’s patriotism did not appear to draw an *impermeable* barrier around the people and the elite. Indeed, he spoke with pride about his elective involvement in diversity and inclusion initiatives at work, which he hoped would combat ‘racial prejudice ... an artefact of our imperial history.’ LIB1’s analysis also contained traces of people/other distinctions, as he described the ‘real problem’ experienced by ‘the bottom end of the working class being outcompeted by these polish guys.’ This tentative people/other distinction was unusual among

liberals, but discernibly weaker than that favoured by most conservatives. And evidently not strong enough to persuade LIB1 to vote in favour of Brexit.

Elite pluralism could thus be made to fit either pro- or anti-Brexit perspectives. Conservative and liberal Brexit views were, then, less contingent on the elite *per se* than the part/whole relations that enjoined the elite to the people and the other. However, the strongest Brexit support was expressed by the minority of conservatives who described the elite as both monist and pluralist simultaneously. These participants tended to oscillate freely between the elite concepts depicted in Fig 17a and 17c (see Chapter 6.3). This dual perspective could be glimpsed in many accounts and were not limited to conservative participants. However, it was most apparent in the conspiratorial accounts of CON2 and CON6, who described the elite as a highly-cohesive authoritarian cabal hidden beneath the outward appearance of a pluralist democracy (see Chapter 6.3).

CON2 and CON6 both expressed populist sentiments throughout their interviews and described themselves as strong supporters of Brexit. During the Brexit stage of our conversation, CON2 related his Brexit support to his 'rebellious' nature:

Should we leave [the EU] or shouldn't we? Anybody who says we want to breakaway and go and do our own thing I'm quite behind. This side of me that is attracted to rebelliousness in terms of like I would make it my business to say something back to the elite if they upset me. CON2

Brexit support was here framed in unmistakably populist terms, as a means of 'say[ing] something back to the elite.' Referring to his own rebellious 'side' and describing how he had prevaricated over the binary choice between Leave and Remain ('should we leave or shouldn't we') gave the impression of an underlying duality to CON2's Brexit support, which may have

been a corollary of the dual, monist-yet-pluralist perspective of the elite he had shared earlier in the interview (see Chapter 6.3).

CON6 linked his pro-Brexit sentiment directly to the 'secret societies' that he believed were in control of governments around the world. He blamed these societies for facilitating inbound immigration, that he believed accounted for 'ninety percent' of Brexit support:

I voted for Brexit so we could be as we used to be. One nation working for us and then bettering other people. ... [The elite's] goal is to extract as much money about you and me as they can do. Keep us where they want us and they'll cream it off. It'll always be the same unless we change things. CON6

This statement contained several populist elements. CON6 constructed a 'one nation' people as a vehicle of 'change' in opposition to a shadowy elite intent on extracting the nation's wealth to be redistributed to an immigrant-other. The elite-other alliance posited by CON6 complexified the *mise en scène* of Brexit, so that it no longer resembled a binary opposition between elite and people. Elite protagonists were able to lead the people, while separate factions of elite antagonists were said to form antagonistic alliances with the other.

CON2 thus described a multipolar Brexit wherein the Bullingdon-elite had joined forces with the British people against a European elite-other alliance, while CON6 'blamed' the shadowy Bilderberg group for promoting in-bound immigration to the UK and Europe. However the conspiratorial elite retained enough coherence to function as a singular target for populist antagonism. The clearest populist sentiments among participants of any political affiliation were thus expressed by those most willing to blend elite monism and pluralism together. Associations between this dual perspective and populism were also evident on the left, where Brexit support was strongest among participants willing to countenance the nationalistic



people constructions typical among conservatives, and thus combine the elite concepts depicted in Figures 17a and 17c.

For instance, the strongest left-wing case for Brexit was made by LAB13. They explained that 'I'm a bad lefty. My first instincts were middle finger at the large institution. And I think that's what a lot of people felt like.' LAB13 had earlier lamented the British left's inability to construct a unifying, specifically national myth around the UK's National Health Service to compete with those that mobilised populist sentiments on the right (see Chapter 7.2). Recalling the banal nationalist arguments in favour of 'Lexit' advanced by a minority of Labour MPs (see Chapter 1.2), LAB13 thus departed from the internationalism affirmed by most left-wing participants by constructing a discursive partition between the (specifically British) people and an other from outside their ethno-national community. Partitions of this sort tended to recur wherever left-wing participants expressed even modest support for Brexit. LAB8, who had earlier identified strongly with a quasi-nationalistic 'Northern' identity (see Chapter 5.2) expressed sympathy for the economic arguments in favour of Brexit, particularly claims that leaving the EU would allow greater investments in Britain's socialised health service<sup>59</sup>.

On both the left and the right, then, the social relations depicted in Figures 17a and 17c appeared more conducive of populist attitudes when they were combined, rather than applied in isolation. If the Brexit narrative hinged on a combination of the mental maps of society broadly favoured by the political left and right, this may help explain Brexit's initially puzzling cross-party support. By some estimations, a third of those who supported left-of-centre parties at the 2015 UK General Election voted for the notionally right-wing Brexit project a year later (Dinsmore 2024).

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<sup>59</sup> 'A lot of it was to do with money. How much we're putting in subsidising everyone else. The Brexit campaign was more about millions of pounds for the NHS. The insults came afterwards' (LAB8).

### 7.3.2 *Horizontal politics: left- and right-wing*

Given that common parlance often describes the elite as situated at ‘the top’ of society, it is hardly surprising that elite concepts would influence the vertical dimension of political thought. It is less apparent how elite conceptions might influence the horizontal, left-right dimension of politics. Among the participants in this study, elite concepts seemed to influence perceptions of social justice —particularly ‘the problem of distribution’ discussed by Zannoni (1978) that was detailed in Chapter 2.3. During the politics stage of the interview when participants were asked whether and how they would change Britain’s elite if given the chance, elite monism was consistently accompanied by calls for the redistribution of elite power and wealth. Left-wing participants generally favoured a monist model of elite power (see Chapter 5) and tended to suggest that the elite be re-configured so as to maximise redistribution of wealth, as one would expect.

However, even outside the left, the strongest calls for redistribution of power came from those conservatives whose elite concepts contained monist elements, rather than the liberals conventionally considered ideologically ‘closer’ to the left, who tended to conceive the elite in pluralist terms. Elite monism thus appeared to promote what Bobbio (1994) terms a ‘distributive’ sense of justice irrespective of participants’ political orientation. This section explores how monism and redistribution were co-articulated in participant accounts, and how relations between people and other shaped participants’ sense of who should be allowed to benefit from redistribution. Left-wing participants tended to call for universal redistributions of wealth [that brought every section of society closer to a mean average]. However, conservatives usually qualified that distribution should be limited to those within British society and should not be extended to ‘others’ from outside its borders. There follows a theoretical discussion of the elective affinity between elite monism and distributive justice suggested by participant responses.

Drawing on Badiou (2014), I contend that monism may be conducive to a distributive approach to politics because of the set of relations that monism introduces to political thought, where elite, people and other are not just considered 'different,' but hierarchically so. I conclude that elite monism may nudge participants towards egalitarianism by establishing relations of 'order' between elite and people that are facilitative of the part/whole analysis basic to any redistribution of wealth (Bobbio 1994). If so, this suggests the mereological judgements we make about the elite and our subjective sense of justice may be mutually constitutive.

### *The problem of distribution*

In the closing stages of the interview, participants were asked whether and how they would change Britain's elite configuration if they were given the chance. I divided participant responses into four categories: redistribution, meritocracy, *status quo*, and elitism. Calls for redistribution sought to bring the social status of the general population closer to that of the elite by compressing society towards a mean average level of wellbeing. LAB13 provided one of the clearest examples of the redistributive approach to elite power, explaining that:

In my lefty dream world I would stop talking about minimum wage and talk about maximum wage. I would anchor maximum wages to multiples of the lowest paid in your organisation. And you can't go outside of that. So if you want to bring people up you have to bring everyone with you. Not just yourself or your shareholders but everyone in your country. LAB13

Just as left-wing participants shared a strikingly consistent monist theory of the elite (see Chapter 5), so too did they share an enthusiasm for redistributive justice. Other responses included LAB10's proposal for 'an upper limit on maximum wealth so that everything over a billion pounds goes to the government.' LAB4 outlined an explicitly Marxist reconfiguration

of Britain's elite, arguing that 'Marx said it's the bourgeoisie versus the people who have nothing. So people should hold on to that. Hold on to their money and revolt against the elite.'

Left-wing participants had different visions for how redistribution was best achieved. Some proposed a multifactorial form of distribution that sought to address intersecting oppressions of class, race, gender and sexuality simultaneously, as when LAB7 argued that 'impact[ing] ... the broader struggle for equality' required that the left actively 'break down the barriers to women, black people, gay people and ... working class people.' And when you do that you can have an Others proposed that elite power should be redistributed 'universally' with little regard for gender, race or sexuality. For instance, LAB13 contended that 'no one chooses their gender identity or their skin colour or their sexuality, and we should absolutely accept that. But I don't agree with redistributing anything based on those things, frankly.'

The positions taken up by LAB7 and LAB13 recalled Fraser's (1995) distinction between redistribution that 'affirms' existing racial, gendered and sexual power relations and that which attempts to 'transform' them. However, neither proposal placed overt limits on their potential beneficiaries. Left-wing participants therefore generally felt that everyone outside of the elite should benefit in proportion to their need, although some disagreed whether the needs of minoritised groups were greater. Conservatives and liberals tended to prefer 'meritocratic' changes to elite power. These were not designed to diminish elite power as such, but rather to ensure that wealth and power were held by the most deserving people in society.

Asked how he would change Britain's elite, CON2 responded 'to spread wealth and distribute it more we're back to the meritocracy and evening out stuff ... for me that's better than socialism where everyone is the same.' Others rejected the problem of distribution as meaningless, arguing that elite configurations were the product of 'thousands of years of history' (CON4) that could not, and should not, be changed by political intervention. A minority of conservatives went further, inverting the problem by calling for a *de*-distribution

of power from the people to the elite. CON7 contended that 'the way power has just sapped away from the royal family over the course of [Elizabeth II's] reign ... I personally find quite sad.' Acknowledging that others might object to this position as elitist, he continued that 'people ... say it's not democratic for monarchs to be involved in the political process and I wouldn't disagree. [However] I *would* disagree that that is a bad thing.' These participants were apparently happy with Britain's *status quo ante* and believed political intervention should look to entrench, rather than challenge, Britain's existing distribution of power.

Crucially for the argument that elite monism facilitates distributive justice, the only conservatives to explicitly advocate redistribution of elite power were those who favoured a dual account of elite power that combined monist and plural characteristics (CON2 and CON6; see Chapter 6.3). The most distributive conservatives were, then, also the most monist. Asked whether and how they would change Britain's elite, CON6 returned to their 'One Nation' approach to social justice:

If you've got a table where every week you feed people, after a while there's too many people to get round the table. So you build a wall to stop them coming in when you should build a bigger table. That means let's not have all the money being held by the billionaires. Make my table a bit bigger. CON6

At first glance, CON6 appeared to be describing the same universal redistribution of elite resources advocated by many left-wing participants. All the elements of egalitarianism appeared to be present, if one assumed that 'the billionaires' were the villains of the piece and those who should be allowed to 'come in' were immigrants from outside of British society.

However, as the name suggests, CON6's One Nation philosophy was predicated on a sharp distinction between the British people and those from outside (Figure 17c). Elite power was, then, only to be redistributed within a British national in-group and not to otherised

populations from outside the UK. The 'wall' that CON6 wished to demolish was that between the elite and non-elite sections of British society. However, he was happy to erect a new wall to exclude those from beyond its borders:

Ninety percent of people that voted for Brexit [...] knew if we stayed within the EU that we were going to get more and more immigration. And they saw the only way of cutting down immigration was to strike out on our own. We've all got to come together. CON6

CON6 thus appeared to otherise immigrant populations such that they could not occupy the same table as 'us,' nor form part of the 'we' he hoped would 'come together.' In Fraser's terms, CON6 did not consider the immigrant-other a political subject to the same extent as Britain's elite and people (Fraser 2010:281). CON6's One Nation philosophy was thus an instantiation of the 'Keynesian-Westphalian frame,' Fraser's (2009:12) name for the set of discursive practices that ignore the political claims of those from beyond the boundaries of a given territorial state.

CON6 was the only conservative who explicitly advocated redistribution of elite power, but two others also expressed strong feelings about inequality. This included CON2, who shared CON6's equivocal monist-yet-pluralist account of the elite (see Chapter 6.3). A businessman in his early sixties, CON2 did not think that governments should redistribute private profits lest this compromise economic growth and leaving 'nothing to distribute.' However, he was sufficiently offended by wealth inequality that he sometimes considered defecting to the political left:

This is sometimes why I ask if I'm in the wrong party because the misguided view about conservatives is that they're all rich people who don't give a shit about the proles. Well that's opposite in me. ... One percent of the world's

population owns more than eighty percent of the wealth or something crazy like that. And that's completely wrong. CON2

CON2 acknowledged that his opposition to inequality constituted a 'mixed message' alongside his broader conservative worldview and his favoured 'meritocratic' approach to elite power. Asked to explain why, then, he remained a conservative, he explained that:

I'm more aligned to less government and people making their own way which is for me the conservative principles. I don't like the nanny state people telling me what to do, and it's becoming moreso. So even though I'm a member of the Conservative party the Conservative government is actually going much further in interfering in people's lives. And it's not what I consider the principles we should be adhering to. So there's a lot of mixed messages there, but the land represents my first vision of somebody who's an elite. Although there are others.

CON2

The cognitive dissonance evident during CON2's discussion of inequality strengthened my sense that elite monism nudged otherwise conservative participants in an egalitarian direction. CON2's rationalisation of his 'mixed message' regarding inequality concluded by alluding to the monist landowning elite described during his image presentation (see Chapter 6.3) whose singularity was immediately qualified ('there are others'). Moreover, a monist elite could be glimpsed in his earlier reference to 'the one percent' made famous by the egalitarian discourse of Occupy Wall Street (discussed in Chapter 3.2).

A third conservative also expressed strong negative feelings about inequality. CON3 advanced one of the more pluralist accounts of the elite split between factions of academia, media and business (see Chapter 6.3). Nonetheless, he grew emotional as we discussed social inequality, specifically the disparities between Oxbridge alumni and less fortunate children from his

hometown in the Red Wall. After pausing to regain his composure, CON3 described the emotions stirred by our conversation about inequality:

When I got upset it was the feeling of injustice. You just yeah you see really bright children ... and you think these kids can make a real difference yet they have to struggle. You don't need to be a great social scientist to work out that if your child has gone to a school and he mightn't be the brightest bunny, but if you've got enough money you can make him sound like the brightest bunny. And that is wrong. CON3

As had CON2, CON3 appeared to experience some dissonance on this point. Like many on the left, he lamented that social inequality persisted because of an 'old boys network' with privileged access to elite education. However he repeatedly qualified his critique, stating that he '[did] not object to that form of education' and '[was] not against high levels of education and Oxford and Cambridge you know, but they've got to be accessible for sure.' CON3's ideological aversion to redistribution of wealth thus appeared to leave the emotions stirred by social inequality with nowhere to go.

My conversation with CON3 made clear that elite monism was not a necessary condition for concerns about inequality. That said, with only one exception (LAB9), every participant who constructed a predominantly monist model of the elite also expressed strong feelings about inequality. With one further exception (CON2), they also suggested that inequality be addressed via some form of redistribution of wealth. Elite monism thus appeared to be associated with a distributive sense of justice irrespective of political orientation. The inverse was also true, as opposition to monism sometimes coincided with desires for *de*-distribution. CON7 dismissed 'the idea that there is always a place in a society from which power ultimately flows' as 'completely wrong' (see Chapter 6.2), and also argued that the 'democratisation' of British society since the Second World War should be 'rolled back' to return power to 'the



hereditaries.' It seems reasonable to conclude that, although elite monism is not strictly necessary to the distribution of wealth, that it may help in one way or another. The closing passages of this section contain a discourse analysis of this affinity between folk mereology and social justice evident among participants.

### *Folk mereology and social justice*

This qualitative study does not permit causal inferences about the apparent cross-party association between elite monism and distributive justice evident among participants, that appeared to transcend party political loyalties. However, as was discussed in Chapter 2.2, Zannoni (1978) has argued that a simplification of 'the problem of distribution' is a 'logical implication' of elite monism<sup>60</sup>. All else being equal, Zannoni argued that redistribution of wealth was a more straightforward proposition among proponents of the monist school of elite theory because it is easier to conceive just settlements between two parties (elite and non-elite) than many. To conclude my analysis of the elite concept's political implications, I extend Zannoni's analysis to argue that elite monism may share a deeper affinity with distributive justice by virtue of the order relations that monism introduces to political discourse (Badiou 2009).

For Bobbio (1994), distributive justice is achieved when everyone enjoys a level of prestige close to a mean average, which is naturally a function of the prestige of the whole society. What he called 'retributive' justice instead arises when individuals redress harms they have caused other individuals. The principle of retribution underlies the sense of justice instantiated in modern legal systems, where guilty parties are expected to atone for their trespasses through incarceration or community service. Bobbio argued that the difference between distributive and retributive justice is ultimately mereological. For him, distributive

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<sup>60</sup> To consider the elite a singular term implies that ... the problem of distribution of power in society can be analysed in terms of elite and non-elite without further specification (Zannoni 1978:18).

justice was a matter of 'relations between the whole and the parts,' while retributive justice 'involves relations between the parts alone' (Bobbio 1977:356).

I contend that elite monism facilitates the part/whole analysis that Bobbio identified with distributive justice to a greater extent than elite pluralism, because the former sorts society's parts into a logical hierarchy according to their conceptual cohesion. That is, the degree to which each part counts as a unitary 'thing.' This argument requires that I step outside of conventional PDT (see Chapter 4.3) which typically conceives discursive relations as equivalences or differences. I contend that relations between mereologically distinct elements – between monist elites and fragmented peoples, say – imply a particular, hierarchical form of difference that Badiou (2014:171) terms a relation of order. I will argue that this order facilitates the calculation of mean averages basic to distributive justice (*ibid.*), and that this may partly explain why calls for redistribution of wealth were strongest among left-wing and 'One Nation' conservative participants who favoured monist conceptions of the elite.

These participants contended that the elite constituted a cohesive establishment whose actions were either co-ordinated because of shared interests or active collusion (see Chapters 5.3, 6.3). It is in this sense that I say most left-wing participants conceived a more-or-less monist elite ( $\text{elite} \approx 1$ ). ( $\text{elite} \approx 1$ ). As monism is the most cohesive form an element can assume, a monist element cannot be 'greater' (read: more dispersed, less cohesive) than any other. Within the fuzzy logics of political discourse (Zadeh 1965) elite monism therefore implies a social relation of order between the elite and the people ( $\text{Elite} \leq \text{People}$ ). Conversely, pluralism does not attribute a definitive identity to the elite. The implied social relation between elite and people is thus one of pure difference ( $\text{Elite} \neq \text{People}$ ).

Crucially for my argument, these subtly distinct relations carry their own discursive, and thus political, implications that may help explain the apparent affinity between elite monism and distributive justice evident among participants. Order relations fundamentally contain more

information than pure difference relations because of the principle of 'substitutability.' Elements are said to be substitutable if they can change places without altering their meaning (Badiou 2014:172). The elements implied by elite pluralism are substitutable, as  $E \neq P$  is functionally identical to  $P \neq E$ . However, under elite monism, the ordered elements  $E \leq P$  cannot switch places without altering their meaning and are therefore non-substitutable. Elite pluralism places the elite in an arbitrary sequence, while elite monism implies a meaningful sequence. It may be, then, that left-wing participants gave more definitive accounts of the elite because elite monism provides a more definitive picture of political reality<sup>61</sup> (which, to be clear, has no bearing on whether it is also a more accurate picture).

Insofar as the principle of substitutability applies to the elements of political thought (e.g. 'the elite' and 'the people'), we should expect distributive politics to be easier when our folk-mereological maps of society contain a monist elite<sup>62</sup>. This is because, per Bobbio, redistribution attempts to bring the wellbeing of a set of parts closer to the mean average of the whole. This means distributive justice is contingent on a part/whole analysis of social conditions. Calculating the mean average of any set is easiest when the positions of each element in the set are known. By virtue of their non-substitutability, the definitive order implied by elite monism ( $E \leq P$ ) facilitates the part/whole calculations of distributive justice. Conversely, the substitutable elements of elite pluralism ( $E \neq P$ ) betray nothing about their relative positions. Such a set has neither an upper nor lower bound, so that it is only possible to perform a part/whole analysis insofar as we can divide by infinity.

It is possible to divide by infinity in some contexts, just as it is possible to pursue a politics of redistribution in a social system containing multiple elites. The important point is rather that distributive part/whole reasoning is simpler when elites and peoples are conceived as part of

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<sup>61</sup> This hierarchical order could also contribute to left-wing participants' preference for structural analyses of elitism, contra the agency-based analyses favoured by conservatives and liberals.

<sup>62</sup> Or, indeed, a monist people – as in the exclusionary forms of redistribution advanced by nationalist populisms that construct an ethno-national 'people' as a cohesive whole.

the definitive order entailed by elite monism. By establishing a definitive order relation between elite and people, elite monism provides the background conditions for an egalitarian politics. This is not to say that social reality functions according to mathematical laws, or that the folk-mereological judgements that give structure to political reality trap human beings within deterministic patterns of thought. Nor do I imply that the part/whole analyses basic to distributive justice are performed consciously by political agents.

I advance the weaker, more contingent argument that if discourse theory is correct that political realities consist of discrete units (e.g. the elite, the people and the other) and the mutually constitutive relations we conceive between them (Foucault 1972, Laclau & Mouffe 1985, Freeden 1994), then:

1. The cohesion we attribute to those units will influence their capacity to establish relations with other concepts (Law 2002).
2. Relations between monist and pluralist elements (Badiou 2009) constitute relations of order, which render them non-substitutable.
3. Non-substitutability facilitates the part/whole analysis basic to distributive justice (Bobbio 1994).
4. All else being equal, elite monism is therefore more conducive to the thinking of distributive justice than elite pluralism.

If this argument has merit, it may not be coincidence that the strongest support for distributive justice came from participants whose social realities contained a monist elite. For left-wing participants who favoured an unequivocally monist elite, the redistribution called for was emphatic and universal. Among those 'One Nation' conservatives who equivocated between elite monism and pluralism, redistribution was qualified and particular – limited only to those within an ethno-national in-group. Among liberals for whom both elite and people were pluralities, redistribution was typically eschewed in favour of 'meritocracy.' That is,

competition between society's individuated parts whose wellbeing is not necessarily judged against that of the whole.

Folk mereology – lay reasoning about the parts and wholes that make up social reality – may then be an important aspect of the background conditions in which (mostly subconscious) political thought takes place. When social reality contains a monist elite, this affords a part/whole analysis and thus an egalitarian solution to the problem of distribution. Conversely, when the elite is conceived as plural, egalitarianism is constrained.

#### **7.4 Discussion**

This chapter sought to understand the political implications of the elite concepts constructed by participants. Having established how left, liberal and conservative participants conceptualised the elite in Chapters 5 and 6, here I explored the part/whole relations participants used to distinguish the elite from the non-elite sectors of society (the people and the other). I then examined how these relations influenced the vertical and horizontal dimensions of participants' political thought (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017). On the vertical dimension, the dual perspective constructed by a minority of conservatives appeared constitutive of populist sentiments. On the horizontal, elite monism appeared conducive of a distributive sense of social justice (Bobbio 1994).

This section reads these findings through the literatures reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 (elite theory, populism studies, and discourse theory). First, I examine how the part/whole relations constructed by participants influenced the strength of the identities participants attributed to the elite. Second, I analyse the association between mereological dualism and populism, introducing the concept of 'constitutive inside' to illustrate how the elite functions as nodal point and empty signifier simultaneously in populist discourse. Finally, I explore the relationship posited between elite monism and egalitarianism in Chapter 7.3. I argue that

monist elite concepts facilitate the conceptual order necessary for redistribution (of power, wealth, or anything else) by enabling clear part/whole analyses of society.

Du Gay's (2008) work on 'Keyser Sütze elites' suggests twenty-first century publics are less able to recognise elites because poststructuralism and financialised globalisation have deconstructed the elite concept (see Chapter 2). However, in this study, those left-wing participants most likely to invoke structuralist and financialised explanations of power also held the most definitive ideas about the elite. Conservatives and (especially) liberals were more likely to describe the elite as vague or elusive. This was particularly evident during the image task. Of the four liberals who took part in the study, one was unable to think of an image to present (LIB5), another presented an image of themselves (LIB1<sup>63</sup>) and the remaining two elected to give verbal presentations in lieu of an image (LIB3, LIB4).

This may be because the plural elites constructed by conservatives and liberals were encircled by at-least-somewhat-permeable conceptual boundaries (see Figures 17b and 17c). For Laclau, 'every symbolic system needs to establish barriers – otherwise coherence of meaning would not be possible' (Zicman de Barros 2023:5). A discursive analysis may, then, explain why the elite concept was most likely to evaporate within the borderless discursive fields constructed by liberal participants (cf. Figure 17b). By suppressing the boundaries between elite, people and other, liberals constructed a homogeneous political space free of the differences and oppositions constitutive of discursive meaning (Dikeç 2012).

For instance, LIB3 described her ideal society as one without divisions, where the viewpoints of every member of society was respected and heard (see Chapter 7.2). While perhaps morally commendable, for Marchart (2014:276-277), 'non-differentiated space[s] of paradise ... undisturbed by heterogeneity or alterity' are incapable of sustaining discursive meanings,

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<sup>63</sup> LIB1 also submitted an image of allied forces fighting in World War 2. However, this image was not presented during the image task but retrieved from Google to illustrate a point made two thirds of the way into the interview.

which always 'depend on an outside which ... provide [their] condition of possibility' (Laclau 1990:39). In attempting to banish antagonism in the political sense, LIB3 may have succeeded in banishing antagonism in the discursive sense. In a borderless society that minimises distinctions between elite, people and other, there is no negative space outside of 'the elite' to imbue it with meaning. When elite, people and other cease to be 'outside' of each other, they cease to be as such.

This borderless model of society was thus the least compatible with populist sentiment. It seems intuitive, then, that populism would be most likely among left-wing participants who placed a solid border around a monist elite. In fact, a dual perspective of the elite that prevaricated between monism and pluralism appeared more compatible with populist discourse than either one in isolation. This finding confounds Zannoni's (1978) argument that the binary elite/non-elite relations entailed by elite monism were the optimal basis of populist discourses that pit elites against mass publics. Instead, the association between mereological ambiguity and populism recalls Laclau's argument that populism requires two 'incommensurable ... visions' of the people. 'It is because the two visions of the *populus* are strictly incommensurable that a certain particularity, the *plebs*, can identify itself with the *populus* conceived as an ideal totality' (Laclau 2005a:94). My findings suggest that populism may also require a similar dual perspective of the elite. Rather than a *plebs* claiming to be a *populus*, the hated elite of Brexit resembled a pluralist democracy that conceals a monist authoritarianism that must be resisted.

This reminds us that the elite concept plays two distinct roles in populist discourse. The elite must be sufficiently definitive—that is, monist—to act as a 'nodal point.' That is, a central landmark within populism's discursive terrain from which all other concepts draw their meaning. However, the elite must also be sufficiently ambiguous to function as an empty signifier that 'signifies everything and yet nothing' (Norval 1994:120), lest it preach exclusively to those who already agree that the elite consists of the aristocrats and oligarchs described in

Chapter 5. This second function is better served by elite pluralism, where the elite concept satisfies (at least one of) Laclau's definition(s) of the empty signifier ('a symbol pointing to an open identity'; Zicman de Barros 2023:5).

Conversely, the monist identities that left-wing participants consistently attributed to the elite suggest that the elite signifier had been hegemonised or 'filled' (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000:9) within left-wing discourse, at least as understood by participant in this study. This finding represents a mirror-image of prior suggestions that the monist, ethno-national peoples constructed by right-wing populisms are too definitive to count as truly empty signifiers:

In left-wing populism the people remains an empty signifier. It can accommodate a lot of different groups, even immigrants, whereas ... if you ask a right-wing populist 'what is this people you are talking about?' They will talk about the nation, blood, race. There is a very strict signifying operation which restricts the openness of this invocation of the people (Stavrakakis & Zamponi 2020:5).

It seems that neither monist nor pluralist elite concepts can hope to fulfil both functions—nodal point and empty signifier—equally well, and are thus imperfect vehicles for populist sentiment. A dual perspective may be necessary if the elite is to function as both a nodal point and an empty signifier simultaneously. It may even allow subjects to adopt a 'parallax view' of elite social structures (Žižek 2006; see Chapter 2.3), and thus capture something meaningful about actually-existing elites that monist or pluralist views struggle to grasp in isolation. Contra Du Gay (2008), conceptual plurality need not be a barrier to populism, so long as it is sufficiently balanced with monism/nodality.

My mereological approach thus offers a new perspective on the meanings attributed to the elite within populist worldviews. Prior work has conceived the elite concept as an aggregate



of binary oppositions. In populism studies, the people is said to be the elite's primary 'constitutive outside' (Bosteels 2016), but it is also acknowledged that the elite's meaning derives from its relations with all of the other concepts present in a discursive field. This approach, indebted to Foucault (1972), positions the elite as the central node in a network of binary relations to other concepts. The picture changes when the elite is re-framed as a mereological concept. So conceived, the elite is no longer a single point *within*, but an area of our mental maps of society. Instead of paths between discrete points, discursive relations become a matter of partitions between interdependent segments of a large whole. So conceived, any change to the elite cannot help but change the dimensions of the other concepts with which it shares a boundary. Elite, people and other are thus more intimately entangled within this mereological conception of discursive space than the Euclidean conception favoured by Foucault (Lefebvre 1974:10).

The mereological elite concepts re-constructed from participant accounts thus resemble a complex of constitutive outsides *and insides*. The political purchase of the elite concept therefore depended on the emphasis that participants placed on the elite's internal and external partitions. On the left, the other was brought inside a people constituted by its externality to the elite. On the right, the configuration was inverted, with the elite and people ensconced within a national border that excluded the other. At the liberal centre, the suppression of all boundaries meant outside and inside were no longer meaningful designations, and the elite concept thus lost coherence. By complexifying the binary notion of constitutive outside, the elite concept can be grasped as a Borromean knot of political meaning.

This helps make sense of the initially-puzzling finding that conservatives and liberals shared a broadly pluralist account of the elite, but diametrically opposed views of the anti-elite discourses of Brexit. Although they were less likely to dispute that Brexit was populist, as left-wing participants often did, liberals were far less sympathetic to Brexit than conservatives. I

contend this was due to the distinct partitions each group constructed between elite and other. Conservatives preferred to combine people and elite into a specifically national community. Liberals, on the other hand, often expressed an internationalist wish to combine the people and the other into a single category. These distinct mental maps aligned with the Leave and Remain referendum options respectively, which asked voters to indicate whether British politics should be delimited by a national or supranational border.

Moving from the vertical (populist-elitist) to the horizontal (left-right) dimension of political thought—participant responses suggest Zannoni (1978:18) was broadly correct to link elite monism to distributive justice. However, his analysis may have been limited by a focus on the elite concept in isolation from the part/whole relations that enjoin the elite to the rest of society. Drawing on Badiou (2009), this chapter has argued that elite monism introduced a conceptual order to political discourse that may facilitate the part/whole analysis basic to distributive justice. For a real-world example, we can again turn to the egalitarian discourse of the Occupy movement, discussed in Chapter 3.2.

Occupy's appeals were constructed around a binary opposition between 'the ninety-nine percent' and 'the one percent.' This folk mereological framing of Zannoni's (1978) 'problem of distribution' establishes an order relation between elite and people ( $1 < 99$ ) that allows a mean average to be calculated, and thus serve as the end goal of a redistribution of wealth. A similar order can be seen in other egalitarian discourses such as 'ye are many-they are few' – a refrain from Shelley's (1847) *Masque of Anarchy* and occasional motto of the British Labour party. Elite monism may represent a qualitative analogue of these quantitative logics, that enable the problem of distribution to be framed as a problem of order that is amenable to redistribution. This may then facilitate a meta-discursive sense of egalitarianism even if it is not made explicit at the level of signification. If so, a pluralist establishment constructed from the same cultural markers as the Bullingdon archetype would not facilitate as distributive a politics as the same contents constructed according to a monist form. It may, then, be no coincidence that Occupy

is recognised as an archetype of distributive politics in the twenty-first century, frequently cited as an ideal to which other leftist discourses might aspire (Gerbaudo 2022).

That said, political reasoning is not purely, or even primarily, logical, and this analysis is not meant to imply otherwise. Political subjectivity consists of innumerable conscious and unconscious elements, practices, emotions and drives (Lash 2012). I do not, then, contend that elite monism locks its adherents into a politics of distribution. Rather that, for political subjects inclined to redistribution, elite monism facilitates it moreso than pluralism. These folk-mereological dynamics help explain Brexit's cross-party appeal (discussed further in Chapter 8), and the seemingly contradictory ways that some populist movements can simultaneously embrace and reject elite power (De Cleen & Ruiz Casado 2023). Understanding how publics construct the boundaries between elite, people, and other may therefore be crucial for anticipating which populist appeals will resonate in different political contexts.

## 7.5 Conclusion

However it is articulated, the elite concept conceals a miniature map of political reality made up of the partitions we construct between the elite, the people and the other. The thirty-six interviews summarised over the last three chapters imply that the elite concept's political purchase does not derive from its content and form alone, but also the often-unspoken acts of folk mereology that shape its relations to the other master signifiers of political thought. I have argued that the mereological forms attributed to the elite concept carry relational, and therefore discursive, and therefore political consequences. Those who drew a firm national border around the people and the elite tended to consider Brexit a populist moment, while those that did not were more likely to consider it an elitist one. Left-wing participants struggled to make sense of Brexit's fusion of anti-elite and anti-other sentiment, as their relatively ordered view of political reality cast the elite and the other as mutual antitheses. On this telling, populism was a necessarily dyadic, vertical opposition between the elite and

everyone else. The pluralised accounts of conservatives and liberals accounts entailed a more elastic set of relations such that certain parts of the plural elite could assume a protagonist role in the Brexit narratives.

The relationship between elite monism and distributive justice appeared to transcend the conventional left-right political spectrum, as the significant minority of conservatives who constructed a monist elite tended to be more concerned about social inequality and more willing to countenance redistributive solutions, albeit within a banal national frame that excluded the other. Drawing on Badiou (2014), I argued that elite monism introduced an order relation to political thought that actively facilitated the part/whole analysis that Bobbio (1994) considered fundamental to a politics of distribution. These findings may shed light on why certain populist discourses resonate more strongly with the left and others with the right. For left-wing participants, the other was typically conceived as an ally against the elite—a constitutive inside of their collective identity. Conversely, conservatives tended to frame the other as an outside with distinct interests from those of the people, while their pluralist conception of the elite allowed them to support some elites while opposing others without contradiction. I conclude that the political implications of the elite concept are contingent on a constant interplay between its content, form, and part/whole relations we construct between the people and the other. The more we talk about elites, the more influential these acts of folk mereology will be in our politics.

## Chapter 8. Conclusion: 'Two Different Worlds'

### 8.1 Back to the Knavesmire

This thesis started with an argument in a pub. Back in Spring 2023, Charles III's coronation prompted differing opinions regarding whether the new head of Britain's hereditary monarchy deserved ridicule or respect. The dispute tore a small hole in the cultural tissue of British hegemony (Nairn 1964:17-19) whose fibres included the Union Jack bunting around the bar, painting of Churchill on the wall, and the village green visible through the windows to the rear. Millionaire radio hosts projected a baneful worldview on to the irreverent masses and their unjust antagonism toward their betters. Martin Keown furrowed his brow. The episode touched on the questions posed by this thesis. How do people acquire their ideas about the elite (RQ1)? And, once acquired, what are their political implications (RQ2)?

In search of answers, I asked thirty-six people politically active residents of the Red Wall region of England to share their views of Britain's elite. Our conversations revealed partisan differences in how the elite was conceived, and their role in political thought, inferred via a framework that combined elite theory, populism studies, discourse and mereology. My analysis suggests that the content, form, and part/whole relations attributed to the elite are all politically consequential. This concluding chapter summarizes these findings, their implications for politics in the real world, and the avenues they suggest for future research.

*How did Red Wall residents construct the elite? (RQ1a)*

Participants often constructed the elite from archetypes from British popular culture mediated through their own life experiences. The Bullingdon archetype loomed largest, particularly on the left, and especially among participants who had themselves attended university. The image of the Bullingdon Club was a reservoir of knowingly anachronistic,

sepia toned folk memories of boarding schools, neo-classical architecture, feudal aristocracy and empire. This all-in-one approach served an important function in left-wing accounts by 'mak[ing] visible the terminal forms of those dominant cultural norms rendered invisible by social structure' (Aiolfi 2023). A preference for structure over agency-based explanations of power pre-empted accusations of 'conspiracy theory' that might otherwise have seemed necessary to justify so monist an account. Participants could point to the structural privileges exemplified by Bullingdon members that included wealth, whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, privileged access to elite education, social connections to the UK Conservative party. Conspiracy was not necessary to sustain elite status while the unconscious processes of social reproduction continued to invest these advantages in so narrow a cohort.

Conservatives also invoked images of a specifically British elitism, although in a very different normative register to those on the left. On the right, elites were more often cast as protagonists whose achievements were won on 'our' behalf, so long as we identified with the mostly-banal nationalism represented by images of the England football team, allied forces fighting in World War 2 and the ancestors of Britain's almost-uniquely persistent monarchy. Where left- and right-wing participants typically constructed the elite to project their opposition to or pride in the British nation, liberal participants were a partial exception. Aside from scattered mentions of British military heroes, liberals rarely associated elitism with notions of Britishness, be they pejorative or aspirational. References to Silicon Valley and the Patara Bouleuterion suggested a more international, indeed internationalist, outlook. However, these elite concepts were somehow less vivid than those constructed on the left and right, leading several participants to recuse themselves from the image task. Lacking in political antagonism, the borderless liberal imaginary appeared less able to constitute the elite as an object of political thought.

*Were the elite one or many? (RQ1b)*

Where prior works (Canovan 1999, Ostiguy & Casullo 2017, Mangset *et al* 2019) concluded that the political left and right principally disagree about which section of society represent the 'true' elite—say the bankers, the politicians, or the state—my findings suggest that conceptions of the elite's basic mereological structure are also politically consequential. There was a strong consensus among left-wing participants that the elite was a cohesive establishment of aristocrats and oligarchs with roots in Britain's past and a monopoly on its present, who invariably played the villain in an over-arching us vs them narrative. Conservatives and liberals were different. For them, the elite was rarely a thing-as-such. Instead, the term functioned as a catch-all for high-achieving people spread across many social domains.

This network of largely-autonomous power centres included aristocrats and oligarchs, but also celebrities, sportspeople, technologists, journalists, academics, philanthropists, employers, monarchs, and shadowy secret societies. Although amenable to empirical observation, plural elite power was also described as vague and elusive – as power was spread so thin as to be practically invisible. However, elite pluralism was less widespread among conservatives and liberals than was monism on the left. A significant minority of conservatives used conspiracy theory to amalgamate their agentic, multivalent, elusive elite into a cohesive social stratum. This produced a dual account of Britain's elite as a sinister monist faction hidden behind a deceptive pluralist façade.

Of course, no participant conceptualised the elite as literally singular in an empirical sense. Even the most monist accounts recognised distinctions between different parts of the British establishment. However, as was discussed in Chapter 2.2, mereological judgements are made at both empirical and ontological levels. Ontological judgements of the elite do not refer to how many elites can be said to exist, but rather – whether those elites that do exist add up to

a meaningful whole (Schaffer 2007). In the thirty-six conversations I had with participants, the ontological level appeared to be more consequential for their subjective understanding of social reality.

*How did participants partition the elite from the people and the other? (RQ2a)*

In addition to their distinct elite concepts, the partisan publics surveyed by this study used distinct logics to situate the elite within society as a whole. On the left, the elite was surrounded by a hard border that repelled non-elites from attaining high status for themselves. The title of this conclusion chapter – ‘two different worlds’ – is a truncated excerpt from my conversation with LAB13, a man in his late thirties who used the phrase to describe the distinct social, cultural and economic reality inhabited by the British elite relative to the rest of the population. As he put it:

You've got two markets, two completely different worlds going on. It's not a ladder people can reasonably climb to the top of. Its literally a social group of people ... from the same schools and industries who very rarely bring people up into the top tier. LAB13

The phrase doubles as a pithy summary of the analysis developed through Chapters 5-7, wherein monist and pluralist models of power corresponded to two very different political realities. On the left, society was sharply partitioned between the elite and everyone else. Among conservatives and liberals, the boundaries between elite and people were much more fluid, such that it was sometimes impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. However, conservatives and liberals parted company when it came to the other. Liberals tended to welcome the other into the same undifferentiated space as the people and elite, although a hierarchy of political subjecthood between people and other could be glimpsed in tales of ‘clever’ Latvians outcompeting British workers. Conservatives were less equivocal. For



them, the immigrant-other was the negativity that conferred meaning on the nation constituted by the alliance of the British elite and people.

*Did these partitions influence participants' political thought? (RQ2b)*

Relations between elite, people and other were influential on the vertical and horizontal dimensions of political thought. Elite pluralism was associated with a relaxed attitude about the capacity of liberal democracy to constrain elite excess, which was often underlain by a scepticism about political intervention *per se*. Monist accounts were full of anti-elite sentiment, illustrated through dyadic comparisons between the deprived and the well off. However, this only became a full-throated populism within the dual perspective on the elite constructed by a minority of conspiratorial conservatives. For them, the elite was an authoritarian monad concealed beneath a deceptively pluralist democracy, whose hidden machinations antagonised a specifically British people. The distinct mental maps of British society implied by the elite concepts constructed by participants meant that left-wing, conservative and liberal participants had very different ideas attitudes about populism. The Bullingdon-led 'people' and immigrant-aligned 'elite' of Brexit discourse bore little resemblance to the all-against-one populism envisioned by left-wing participants. Conservatives and liberals were more willing to label Brexit a populist force, but constructed the label in very different normative tones that appeared contingent on the relations they conceived between people and other.

The mereological approach pursued throughout this thesis shed considerable light on the perennial 'problem of distribution' (Zannoni 1978) thought to separate the political left from right (Bobbio 1994). When the elite was constructed as a monist establishment, social justice was a matter of distributing the resources hoarded by the singular elite among the population. Conversely, when the elite was conceived as a decentralised network, justice was a matter of meritocracy, retribution, and equality of opportunity rather than outcome. Associations

between monism and distribution seemed at least somewhat independent of political orientation, as the most distributive conservative accounts also tended to be the most monist. I argued that distributive justice was actively facilitated by the order relation introduced to political discourse by elite monism ( $E < P$ ). However, whether distribution was conceived as universal or not seemed more contingent on relations between the people and the other than the elite *per se*. Distribution was conceived universally when people and other were one. When they were separated by a hard national border, the latter were often denied full political subjecthood (Fraser 2010).

## 8.2 Implications

These findings carry several implications for politics in the real world. First, they contribute to understanding of the discursive processes that underlay the Red Wall phenomenon, which saw a historically Labour-supporting region vote for a notionally right-wing populist movement in relatively high numbers (Ashcroft 2016). Brexit support was strongest among those who took a dual perspective of British politics that combined the typical elements of left-wing and conservative discourse, peaking among conservatives who constructed an at-least-somewhat monist elite. There were also signs of lukewarm Brexit support among left-wing participants happy to re-allocate elite resources within a Keynesian-Westphalian frame (Fraser 2007:273). Some of Brexit's cross-party appeal may then have derived from resonances between populist discourse and the respective monisms favoured by left- and right-wing folk mereology.

These findings challenge accounts of the Red Wall phenomenon as a straightforward example of rightward drift. Some Brexit support in this historically left-leaning region may instead reflect a desire for the redistribution of elite power, albeit within the national borders reaffirmed by the referendum result. This impulse is difficult to grasp through the categories of left and right alone. The Red Wall phenomenon may be an example of what Fraser (1995)

terms 'affirmative' social justice. That is, efforts to redistribute wealth that do not challenge status hierarchies that place greater value on citizens than foreigners, distinct from the apparently universal sense of justice advocated by most left-wing participants in this study.

Although much of the Red Wall 'returned' to Labour control in 2024, the UK General Election of that year also saw an electoral breakthrough for Reform UK (formerly the Brexit Party)—who won five parliamentary seats including the Red Wall constituency of Ashfield. These gains were consolidated in the 2025 council elections, when Reform gained control of seven counties in the Red Wall region and a further parliamentary seat in nearby Runcorn & Helsby (Curtice 2025). Responses from Britain's political mainstream have tended to focus on the exclusionary aspect of Reform's appeal (Stacey 2025) but may have paid insufficient mind to whether the egalitarian impulse latent within Brexit's folk theory of power might be divorced from Reform's nativist framework. Left-wing parties seeking to gain ground in these constituencies might try articulating a redistributive politics that acknowledges the populist frustrations of constituents while minimising the exclusionary distinctions between people and other.

Whether such attempts would constitute a novel strand of left-wing populism is an open question, but the clear and consistent accounts of the British elite shared by left-wing participants pose several questions about the Keyser Söze elite phenomenon discussed in Chapter 2. Du Gay (2008) has suggested that social science's discursive turn clouded the elite concept and thereby limited its political utility. However, the findings from this study suggest that precise elite concepts may also constrain anti-elite politics. Left-wing participants had very clear ideas about the holders of power in British society, which showed few signs of poststructuralist deconstruction. If this finding generalises beyond the participants in this study, the relative electoral weakness of left-wing populisms in recent British political history – Occupy London, Momentum, Corbynism, Sinn Féin and the Scottish independence campaign (March 2017, Dean 2023) – becomes difficult to explain within Du Gay's framework.

Each of these movements constructed a decidedly monist elite, and largely from the same aristocratic-cum-oligarchic tropes described by left-wing participants in Chapter 5. However, some significant victories aside, none achieved the sustained constitutional change realized by Brexit. Moreover, while Nigel Farage's Reform UK (née The Brexit Party) leads opinion polls for the next United Kingdom general election as I write in July 2025-comfortably ahead of the Conservative and Labour parties that have governed the UK since Lloyd-George's Liberal coalition dissolved in 1918-Occupy, Corbynism and Scottish Independence find themselves in various stages of decline, while the path to Irish unification remains unclear.

Alongside the conceptual multiplicity decried by Du Gay, it may be that singular elite concepts can also restrain populist discourse if their specificity fails to represent a sufficient volume of the heterogeneous anti-elitisms present in whichever society they hope to change. Indeed, among the participants surveyed in this study, it was only when monism and pluralism were combined that the elite concept appeared to have been optimised for 'the unavoidable choreography ... between part and whole' that sustains populist discourse (Stavrakakis 2020:10). The many commentators who hope to build a left-wing populist response to the ascendant ethno-populisms of Euro-American politics (e.g. Mouffe 2018) may, then, need to intervene at the level of form rather than content.

If we assume that plurality is a feature of empty signification, as Laclau sometimes implied (Zicman de Barros 2023) a left populism may require some deconstruction of the elite archetypes that populate left-wing discourse. However, the affinity between monism and distributive justice posited in Chapter 7 suggests that pluralising the elite may compromise the distributive sense of justice that makes the left the left (Bobbio 1994). The result might be populist, but there is no guarantee that it would be a distributive, overtly left-wing populism. My findings thus point to a possibly overlooked tension between populist discourse and the British left's social democratic mission (Dean 2020).

That left-wing participants constructed such definitive elites but fragmented peoples also raise questions for scholars who conceive populism as 'an antagonistic form of us-building' (Vulovic & Palonen 2023:546). My findings suggest that this description may apply too broad a brush, and thus assume that all populisms will resemble the working-class and/or ethno-national movements that were first given the name. The dissolution of class identities in recent decades (Savage 2015)—evident in the vicarious, third-person accounts of 'the working-class' even among left-wing participants—may have altered the terms of engagement for the populist left. If Laclau & Mouffe (1985) succeeded in excising class essentialism from the post-Marxist left, elite-essentialism may now be crucial to egalitarian populism. One need only look to South America for evidence of left-wing traditions of them-building, which have resisted outside interference from the United States ('El Imperio') and its allies within the region's 'Northernized' elite (Ostiguy & Casullo 2017:4) for many decades.

However, even here, reactionary populists like Bolsonaro, Milei and Bukele have won executive office in historically left-leaning countries since the turn of the millennium. If we define populism as an us-building logic, the left will build their coalitions from the bottom up when my findings suggest they should be working from the top down. The left is thus denied the conceptual tools needed to channel popular frustrations into egalitarian demands for fairer distributions of power, rather than the retributions promised by populists of the right (Bobbio 1994). The people-centric approach to populist research may then contribute to the rightward turn documented in populist politics around the globe since the 1980s (Gilbert & Williams 2022).

Regarding ethno-populism, the pluralist elites constructed by conservative participants helps make sense of a recurrent, sometimes puzzling feature of twenty-first century politics. That is, the tendency of some apparently populist movements of the right to advocate the interests of certain fractions of the elite, that De Cleen & Ruiz Casado (2023) call 'populism of the privileged' (see Chapter 3.3). This apparent contradiction dissolves when we relax the

Muddean (2019) assumption that the populist elite is necessarily monist. Pluralism renders the elite's borders with people and other permeable, allowing for all manner of alliances that make little sense when the elite is conceived as a hermetically-sealed monolith. This narrative flexibility may help explain why right-wing variants have become the dominant form of populism in recent decades for the first time in history (Funke et al 2020). When the individual is the unit of analysis, elite, people and other are fluids that can be mixed together to produce any number of compounds. However, constructed at the level of the group, those same concepts resemble solid blocks that resist combination.

Finally, the vague elites constructed by liberal participants clarify tensions between liberal democracy and populism (Wolkenstein 2019). In Chapter 7, I proposed that the 'borderless' politics constructed by several liberal participants was constitutive of their ambiguous accounts of the elite. For Laclau & Mouffe (1985), the people and the other are the constitutive outsides of the elite. That is, the negativity beyond the elite's own dimensions that constitutes the discursive space in which the elite concept coheres (Sabsay 2019). Bringing the elite and the other 'inside' the people in a show of maximal inclusion does not produce a new outside. Rather it robs each concept of the constitutive negativity essential to their own coherence. Populism is impossible in so undifferentiated a space, as the elements of the populist dyads and triads of left and right dissolve into indeterminacy (Revelli 2019). On this telling, incompatibilities between liberalism and populism run deeper than ethics or institutional preferences (Saffon & Urbinati, 2013:451). Antagonism is incompatible with a politics without borders.

### **8.3 Critical reflections**

The arguments made by this thesis should be understood within the following set of limitations. First, although partisan differences were clear and consistent, the salience of participants' political orientations may have been amplified by the project's recruitment

process. Participants were recruited according to four criteria: politics, place, poverty, and sometimes gender<sup>64</sup>. However, only the political criterion was consistently made explicit to participants. Participants were contacted via political parties, and most therefore assumed (correctly) that I was interested in their thoughts about the elite qua their political orientation. The study thus hailed participants as politicised – rather than placed, classed or gendered – subjects. This may have strengthened the study's sensitivity to political logics, but does not necessarily mean perceptions of the elite depend more on political orientation than place, class, gender, or any other characteristic. The primacy of politics in my analysis may simply indicate that politicised interviews tend to generate politicised responses. Readers should also bear in mind that the Conservative party were in power for the entire data collection process. This may have encouraged a defensive stance with respect to the elite among conservatives, and an oppositional stance among members of other parties.

Second, my focus on the elite concept means that participant statements about the people and the other cannot carry the same weight as those about the elite. While the people and the other were frequently invoked during my conversations with participants, suggesting a clear conceptual relationship to the elite, this relationship may look different when examined from alternative angles. Indeed, taking the elite as my analytical starting point may have obscured certain aspects of these relations. That said, the frequency of the people and other in participant accounts is arguably a stronger finding for the fact that it was unexpected and unprompted. Re-designing the semi-structured interview to solicit these views would then also carry risks, including the reification of preconceived notions of these relations.

Third, the sample of participants recruited was not representative of the demographic profile of the North of England. Participants were overwhelmingly white and predominantly male,

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<sup>64</sup> As I discussed in Chapter 4.2.1, gender was not part of my original recruitment strategy. However, as women were grossly under-represented among the first twenty interview participants, a call for specifically female participants was circulated among party representatives. Seven of the ten female participants were recruited via these gendered invitations, which increased the proportion of female participants from 10% to 31%.

which surely influenced the accounts of the elite captured during interviews. Moreover, data collection focused on a particular geographic setting – the Red Wall region of England. Any geographic setting will always entail particular historical relations between elites, peoples, others. These will inevitably have shaped participants' accounts, and my findings may not generalise to other regions. The decision to focus on politically active participants was taken to foreground the elite concept's political implications (see Chapter 4.2.1) but meant that participants likely carried preconceptions imbibed from their political practice into the interviews.

Fourth, the study focused on elite power, rather than power *per se*. This framing was chosen to shed light on populism, which attributes power to nameable agents able to serve as objects of popular derision. However, a long tradition of instrumentalist social science has questioned the 'humanist' assumption that power is wielded by human agents rather than abstract social forces (Poulantzas 1973, Giddens 1973, Giddens 1984). Future research might examine whether the partisan monist/pluralist split persists when participants are asked to consider distributions of power that are not confined to human agents. The decision to focus on elite power may have inadvertently reproduced certain assumptions about agency and causation that alternative conceptualizations of power might challenge.

Fifth, it might be objected that my participants were not themselves populists in any definitive sense, and that extrapolations about populism are therefore unwarranted. However, the discursive methodology pursued in this thesis is explicitly anti-essentialist with respect to political identity. On this telling, there is no such thing as a populist person, only populist logics and subject positions. Populism is not something that resides within people but is rather constituted through discursive practices. When participants critiqued Britain's elite, they were engaging in a populist practice even if the participant themselves would not identify with the label. Moreover, populist elites are not constructed *ex nihilo*. At very least, the elites



described by participants illustrate the proto-populist notions about elites that any anti-elite discourse must draw on to be politically effective.

Finally, the appearance of mathematical notation ( $<$ ,  $>$ ,  $=$ ) in Chapter 7 may suggest that the affinity between elite monism and distributive justice proposed in this thesis is somehow quantitative or based on 'rational choice' principles. In fact, they are meant to describe discursive, rather than purely logical, relations between the elite and its conceptual 'outsides.' Mereological judgements of the elite, people and other concerned their relative cohesion (i.e. monism or pluralism)—a qualitative difference of type rather than degree. Chapter 7 should not, therefore, be read as an attempt to reduce political thought to a series of deterministic IF, THEN operations. Statements like 'people  $>$  elite' should rather be taken as attempts to capture, as precisely as possible, the contours of the never-entirely-fixed mental maps of society in which political thought occurs—what discourse theorists term 'discursive space' (Laclau 1990, Massey 1995, Dikeç 2012, Marchart 2014:274, Sciamarella 2020). Mathematical notation was also introduced to mitigate the semantic understandings that may follow from statements that participants conceived the elite as 'greater' or 'lesser than' the people<sup>65</sup>, which may imply some normative or ethical, rather than mereological, hierarchy.

#### 8.4 Future work

This thesis suggests several promising avenues for future research that would deepen our understanding of the elite concept and its political implications. The first concerns the partisan monism/pluralism split evident among participants. Affinities between elite monism and pluralism have been noted in the elite theory literature (Zannoni 1978, Shapiro 2005), however this thesis represents the first empirical evidence that mereological judgements of

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<sup>65</sup> As Badiou (2014:172) contends, 'for intuitive convenience, and in order to see the comparisons,  $x \leq y$  can be read as "x is less than or equal to y." However we should take care that the dialectic of the great and the small does not come to subsume the order relation. These are only ways of speaking. The essence of the order-relation is comparison in-itself.'

the elite influence the political thought of lay people. These tendencies should be explored in different contexts and demographic groups. Politically inactive participants represent a demographic of particular interest, as do participants active in politics outside of the mainstream represented by the Green, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties.

Comparative analyses of these groups may shed light on whether the partisan monism/pluralism split emerges from close engagement with political discourse, or represents a reasoning style that is autonomous from experiences of conventional political activism. To further explore the related inference that left-wing populisms constitute 'an antagonistic form of [them] building' (Vulovic & Palonen 2023:546) future work might also examine how the elite are constructed within left-wing discourse in South America, where a unique populist tradition is said to construct peoples 'transformatively' to oppose the 'El Imperio' archetype (Ostiguy & Casullo 2017). As the UK Conservative party were in government for the entire data collection period (October 2022 – October 2023), future work should also examine the monism/pluralism split in settings where left-wing parties hold power.

Second, the relationship between elite monism and distributive justice posited in Chapter 7 should be examined in greater detail. This could involve further rounds of qualitative investigation, particularly those that attempt to engage with non-linguistic forms of spatial or metaphorical reasoning. However, there is also the potential for experimental work. Moving from sociology to social psychology, future work could investigate whether and how monist accounts of the elite participants to interpret social justice issues in distributive terms and/or influences moral judgments of economic inequality in other ways. Such experiments might even provide insight into whether the mental maps of society implied by the elite concepts discussed in Chapter 7 are a cause or consequence of left-wing, liberal and conservative worldviews. Future work might also connect the mereological analysis undertaken in this thesis to the various 'mathematical turns' to have taken place in the social sciences in recent years (Lash 2012). The concept of order relation employed in Chapter 7 was drawn from

Badiou's (2009, 2014) set theoretic social theory, and could be developed further to understand the structure of the discursive fields in which political reasoning takes place. Sciamarella's (2020) *Topological Reading of Ernesto Laclau* may provide a useful point of departure.

The third avenue for future work involves expanding the concept of folk mereology to illuminate other issues within populism studies. It has long been recognised that mereological judgements are crucial for navigating physical space, and the findings of this thesis suggest they may be similarly crucial within political and discursive space. To understand the theories of power and justice encoded within populist narratives, my findings suggest it is not enough to understand whether they oppose, for instance, economic or cultural elites (cf. Mangset et al 2019). It is also crucial whether the elite is configured as a cohesive whole, disjoint set of parts, or a composite of both at once. As in prior work on folk mereological judgements about physical objects, researchers might examine the teleological functions played by mereological judgements subjects about the social world. Emphasising the part/whole relations between elite, people and other may also help mitigate populism studies' people-centric tendencies, wherein the elite concept is relegated to a supporting role behind the people. These relations are crystallized by the concept of folk mereology, which binds the elite, people and other in a Borromean knot of political meaning.

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**Appendix 1. Thematic analysis structure (RQ1)**

Participants	No.	Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Left-wing	1	The Bullingdon archetype	Status markers	Posh accents, fine clothing, classical architecture, whiteness, patriarchy, trashing restaurants.
			Institutional power	Conservative Party, public schools, Eton, Oxbridge.
			Economic power	Old money, landed gentry, and hereditary privilege.
	2	Education	Institutional	Oxbridge, public schools, elite pathways.
			Social	Cultural capital, social networks, cultural codes, and career pathways, merit, social mobility
			Divisions	North/South, cities vs towns, London, omewhere/anywhere, South East metropolitan, uneven development,
	3	Geography	Identity	Northern, industrial, town, provincial, dormitory towns.
			Practices	Exploitation, corruption, irresponsibility. unethical behaviour, trashing restaurants.
			Attitudes	Entitlement, snobbery, and irresponsibility., malign influence, and evil.
	4	Villainy		
Conservative/ liberal	5	Agency	Personal attributes	Persuasion, self-confidence, charisma, leadership, competence, moral ambiguity.

Participants	No.	Theme	Subthemes	Codes
			Achievement	Merit, national pride.
			Protagonists	Role models, national pride, achievement, philanthropy, employment, noblesse oblige, innovation.
			Antagonists	Inequality, arrogance, Bilderbergs, string-pulling, do-gooders, unproductive.
			Ambiguity	Credit where due, good/evil, moral ambiguity, means justify ends.
			Conceptual	Hard to define, unclear boundaries, defensiveness, anti-structural.
			Fluidity	Temporal shifts, competitiveness, rhizomatic.
			Hidden	Behind the scenes, string-pulling, secret societies, Bilderbergs, antisemitism.
			Agentic	Collusion, cohesion.

## Appendix 2. Sample invitation to participants

### Research invitation: Who are the elite?

The University of York would like to invite you to take part in a research project titled **Who are the elite?** Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let us know if anything is unclear or you would like further information.

#### What is the purpose of the study?

There has been a lot of talk about the role of elites in society in the last few years. Elites are generally seen as the people who hold real power in society, though it can sometimes be unclear exactly what the term means and whether different people understand it in the same way. Academics have generated several definitions and theories, but less is known about what ordinary people think about elites and whether they even think the concept is a useful one.

Our project addresses this gap by talking to people about what the concept of elites means to them. We are interested in how people's views on elites might relate to their personal history, their everyday experience of life, and the places they live. We are especially interested in the views of people who live in the North of England. We hope that the findings generated by the project will contribute to the debate about the role of elites in society.

#### Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the project because you are a member of the Conservative Party living in-or-near [town], one of 16 towns in the North of England which make up the project's target area.

#### What would my participation involve?

If you decide to take part, you will be interviewed by the lead researcher (Adam Dinsmore) either in person in a safe public place or over telephone/Zoom if you prefer. Interviews will last around an hour. Adam will have a list of prompts to help guide the interview, but it's fine if the conversation goes off in its own direction. You will be asked to bring along an image which you feel represents elites to discuss at the beginning of the interview. The image can be anything and might be printed out, drawn on a piece of paper, or saved to your phone. Interviews will be recorded and the recordings stored confidentially by the researcher. No one will be given access to your recording other than the researcher.

#### Do I have to take part?

No, participation is optional. If you do decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records and will be asked to sign a consent form and complete a short questionnaire containing some key details about you. If you change your mind about taking part, you will be able to withdraw up to 3 months after participating without having to provide a reason.

#### How do I get involved?

If you think you would enjoy taking part, please contact me directly at [adam.dinsmore@york.ac.uk](mailto:adam.dinsmore@york.ac.uk) to arrange a time and date for the interview.