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Achilleos-Sarll, Columba; Martill, Benjamin

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CHAPTER 2

Toxic Masculinity: Militarism, Deal-Making and the Performance of Brexit

Columba Achilleos-Sarll and Benjamin Martill

I INTRODUCTION

Existing accounts of the referendum campaign and Brexit have observed differences in voting patterns between men and women, as well as the disproportionate risk that women will be disadvantaged by withdrawal from the European Union (EU), however, little has been said from a gendered perspective about the discourses that surrounded the Brexit campaign. Drawing on a combination of critical feminist theory, documentary analysis and elite semi-structured interviews, this chapter demonstrates the extent to which Brexit has been dominated by discourses surrounding the institutionalization of a dominant masculinity,

C. Achilleos-Sarll
Department of Politics and International Studies,
University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
e-mail: C.Achilleos-Sarll@warwick.ac.uk

B. Martill (✉)
London School of Economics and Political Science,
Clement's Inn, London, UK
e-mail: B.M.Martill@lse.ac.uk

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which manifested in two principal ways. Firstly, through the deployment of language that was associated with militarism and, secondly, through language that was associated with business interests and ‘deal-making’ rhetoric. Discourses of militarism highlighted Britain’s assumed global role in the world emphasising strength, security and global power, whilst discourses of ‘deal-making’ equated the negotiations to a business transaction and, consequently, represented Anglo-European relations in conflictual terms—as a contest between two sides. We argue that these dominant constructs are problematic in that they preclude the emergence of an approach based on dialogue, equality, empathy, care or other-regardingness. Moreover, they inhibit fundamental conversations that address, and call attention to, the gendered social consequences of post-Brexit policies in the United Kingdom (UK).

The decision of the British electorate to leave the EU on 23 June 2016 sent shockwaves through the political establishment, the international community and, of course, the financial markets. As rapid political changes led, in the weeks thereafter, to the succession of Theresa May as Conservative leader and prime minister, Brexit dominated the domestic political agenda—and, indeed, has continued to do so. Much of the existing analyses have only scratched the surface of the gendered dimensions of the discourses surrounding Brexit. The kind of questions being asked—which way women voted, for instance, or how many women were represented—echo feminist concerns of the liberal mainstream, but have not conceptualised the complex ways in which the campaign itself was profoundly gendered. Critical feminist accounts, moreover, whilst advancing the appropriate analytical tools to delve deep into the study of gendered discourses, have paid more attention to the gendered *consequences* of Brexit than they have to the gendered nature of the campaign itself, and the subsequent effects this has had post-referendum. We therefore argue that existing analyses have failed to address the gendered discourses invoked during the campaign which (re-) produced, and (re-) articulated masculinity in old-new ways. Taking our lead from Aida A. Hozic and Jacqui True’s work on the role played by masculinist inter-elite competition and the representations of masculinity and femininity which resulted from these struggles, in this chapter we examine how the rhetoric of ‘deal-making’ and the language of militarism emerged during the campaign and found a foothold in post-referendum British politics.

Revealing the mechanisms by which Brexit discourse is both gendered and gendering is fundamental to understanding how, and in what ways,

the Brexit campaign was performed; what led to Brexit; what Brexit embodied; and ultimately attempting a (tentative) prediction of what its consequences might be. Revealing the masculinist, militarist, racialised and heteronormative nature of Brexit discourse can go some way to explaining how this is currently affecting, and how it will continue to affect, the negotiations and their outcome. We therefore argue that discourses around militarism, and subsequently typologies of ‘deal-making’ utilised by the state, offer fertile terrain for highlighting how such discourses (re-)produced gendered hierarchies. The historical valorisation of traits usually associated with masculinity—strength and resilience—are confirmed and reinforced by this discourse, whereby such traits are believed to be the necessary prerequisites for political office. In these current times of “masculinist political revival” (Mellstrom 2016; 135) the example of Brexit has broader relevance. As such discourses are becoming increasingly deployed across the Western world, a predominantly white electorate is being encouraged to throw their support behind these businessmen-cum-leaders—from Donald Trump to Andrej Babiš—leaders who attach themselves to, and frequently deploy, military metaphors and business language (Politico 2015).

Our argument proceeds as follows. In the next section, we review the literature on gender and Brexit within both public opinion research and critical feminist theory. We note the lacuna existing within this field more broadly when it comes to critical studies of the (gendered) discourses surrounding the referendum campaign. In the subsequent section we outline our theoretical framework, justifying our focus on gendered configurations and practices through an engagement with critical feminist approaches. To follow, we empirically chart the emergence and deployment of gendered discourses before, during, and after the referendum campaign, illustrating how these have served to frame the debates surrounding Brexit. In the concluding section we summarise our argument and reflect on some of the implications that follow from a focus on the gendered nature of these discourses for understanding the Brexit process and how it is likely to unfold in the coming years.

2 GENDERED STUDIES OF BREXIT

Brexit has invited much scholarly discussion from a range of academic perspectives. While it is not possible to do justice to this burgeoning literature here, it is worth highlighting the emergence of a number

of studies aiming to make sense of the causes and consequences of Brexit from an analytical—as opposed to partisan political—standpoint (e.g. Armstrong 2017; Clarke et al. 2017; Evans and Menon 2017; Glencross 2016; Martill and Staiger 2018; Oliver 2018; Outhwaite 2017). In spite of the salience of the male dominated nature of the Brexit campaign and calls to increase female representation in the negotiations (Branigan 2017), it is perhaps surprising that academic accounts of Brexit have had little to say on the question of gender. None of the edited volumes noted above, for instance, contain specific chapters on gender and Brexit, and none of the monographs consider this perspective in any great detail. Rather, gendered discussions of Brexit have taken place predominantly through the ‘blogosphere’, with a number of prominent feminist contributions emerging in the run-up to—and in the immediate aftermath of—the referendum (e.g. Haastrup et al. 2016; Shutes 2017). Nevertheless, some preliminary work on gender and Brexit may be found in research on British politics and public opinion that have focused on gendered patterns of voting and campaign support, and in the emerging literature on critical feminist International Political Economy (IPE) and Brexit. In this section we briefly discuss both of these approaches. While we find these literatures helpful, we argue that neither is fully equipped or has attempted to explore the nature of the gendered discourses that pre-dated—and to a large part determined—the referendum result.

There has been some analysis of the gender variable in public opinion research on Brexit, which has sought to use gender as a variable to understand differing attitudes towards the EU. Goodwin and Heath (2016), in an early analysis, for instance, argued that Brexit could be best explained by the combination of educational inequality and rapid economic change. They argued that for many individuals this resulted in the ‘double whammy’ of being “at a significant disadvantage in the modern economy [and] also being further marginalised in society by the lack of opportunities they faced in their low-skilled communities”. Whilst they did not find that gender was a significant factor explaining individual decisions, they did suggest that “people in favour of the death penalty and harsher prison sentences in general, and who are against equal opportunities for women and homosexuals [were] much more likely to support leave”. Age, and a generational divide, was often invoked as a significant explanatory factor, with three-quarters of 18–24 year olds voting to remain, and 60% of elderly voters supporting the leave campaign

(Wilson 2017, 546). Attitudes towards immigration has been another recurring theme, with scholars noting that support for a leave vote was higher in areas which had seen rapid increases in migration from Central and East European countries and especially where public services had not kept pace with the resulting increase in demand (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017, 452; Wilson 2017, 547). The most sophisticated analyses of the vote address the interactions between these recurring, foregoing variables. Clarke et al. (2017), for example, examine the relative impact of a host of potentially competing and confounding variables, including political affiliation, class, income, age, region, and, of course, gender, eliciting a more comprehensive picture. Interestingly, they find that whilst support for EU membership has traditionally been higher among men (2017, 83), “Leave voting did not vary by gender. Among both men and women, 51% reported that they voted to leave” (2017, 154). Whilst other studies have reported similar findings for the ‘null hypothesis’ when examining attitudes for men and women, it should also be noted that, among the 18–24 year olds, women were more strongly in favour of remaining than men, with 80% of female 18–24 year olds opposing Brexit, compared with 61% of their male counterparts (Cain 2016, 3). While this does suggest that gender was a significant factor in the vote, even if its effects were not necessarily linear, such analyses obscure how the gendered effects of Brexit run deeper than voting patterns.

Other work on gender and Brexit has emerged from critical feminist writings on the topic and offer important insights relevant to our approach. Hozic and True, for instance, have advanced a critical feminist IPE perspective on Brexit, which they describe as a ‘scandal’, an event able to animate the public imaginary in seemingly unintended ways since it “unmask[ed] deep political and material fault-lines in society” (Hozic and True 2017, 271). The authors suggest that just because “gender differences between men and women’s vote were not observed in the referendum at the aggregate national level”, does not mean Brexit was not gendered in other more nuanced and complex ways. We need to acknowledge, they argue, the extent to which gender, intersecting with other identity markers expose ‘intersectional inequalities’, since it is at the intersection of these identity markers—gender, race, class, etc.—that the complex gendered effects of Brexit become apparent. For instance, the greatest losers from globalisation, they argue, are not the “traditional working classes but poor, migrant women from minority racial, ethnic and religious groups” (Hozic and True 2017, 279). Brexit, they argue,

was itself a product of a process of the subjectification of women—and others, including migrants—whose participation in debates was limited by a coterie of elite white males engaged in an inter-elite conflict which they transformed, and escalated, into a public issue (Hozic and True 2017, 276). Guerrina and Masselot (2018) offer another important contribution from a critical feminist perspective. They argue that Brexit “carries a substantial risk to the interests of traditionally marginal groups (including women) who have hitherto been covered by the EU legal framework” (2018, 319). This is, they posit, a consequence of government opposition in the UK to gender equality policies on the grounds they run counter to business interests. The marginality of gender and equality, they argue, reflects the high-low policy binary whereby “the interests of business are likely to trump over other fundamental principles, e.g. equality” (327). They conclude that, ironically, any post-Brexit economic crisis will likely reinforce this tendency, given the gendered impact of austerity and the use of ‘crisis’ narratives to defend business-centric policies (Guerrina and Masselot 2018, 319).

The literature on Brexit from a gendered perspective has highlighted important, yet unexplored, aspects of the vote and its consequences, as well as the necessity to explore Brexit through a gendered lens and to apply “a feminist curiosity” (Enloe 2004). However, these existing works have not fully accounted for the role played by gendered discourses in the campaign itself, or how these will likely come to affect the outcome of the Brexit process. By discourses we refer here to “system[s] of meanings, of ways of thinking, images and worlds that...shape how we experience, understand and represent ourselves as men and women [and] shape many other aspects of our lives and culture” (Cohn 1993, 228–229). Public opinion research has little to say on gendered discourses since it is stuck in something regarding, in ontological terms, a ‘liberal feminist trap’; by using gender as an explanatory variable, these studies do not have the conceptual dexterity to grasp the underlying gendered nature of the campaign they are studying. Rather, the consensus in these approaches is that the role played by gender is minimal, since males and females tended to vote in similar ways in the referendum. The task of understanding gendered discourses is, of course, much better suited to critical feminist approaches, of which we have offered a few examples. And yet, whilst critical feminist works on Brexit remain in their infancy and will no doubt proliferate in the years to come, it is notable that no studies to date have examined specifically the gendered discourses at

the heart of the Brexit campaign. By fixation on the (not insignificant) consequences of the Brexit vote, we argue that existing critical feminist accounts of Brexit have paid insufficient attention to how the campaign unfolded, the nature of the ideas that came to prominence, and the subsequent impact of these ideas on the post-Brexit political environment in the UK. Overlooking the gendered discourses of the Brexit campaign is problematic, since these ideas are ascendant, and will go a long way to determining the consequences of Brexit.

We situate our argument within the emerging body of critical feminist scholarship on Brexit, in order to contribute an exploration of the gendered nature of discourses surrounding Brexit, which, we argue, have not received adequate attention in the existing literature. Taking inspiration from, yet moving beyond, Hozić and True who interrogate the agents of Brexit, as well as the intersectional inequalities that made Brexit conceivable, we focus on the production of gendered configurations in the discourse that surrounded the Brexit campaign.

We focus in particular on two prominent discourses associated with the referendum campaign: militarism and deal-making. The language of the campaign, we argue, was problematically steeped in and wedded to gendered signifiers surrounding militarism and business rhetoric, reflective of a history of male domination and the valorisation of certain masculine traits in the political domain. Understanding how these discourses played out, we argue, is fundamental to understanding what Brexit represented and also where the process is likely to lead over the next few years. Moreover, it provides a useful supplement to pre-existing work on the referendum by highlighting the role of gendered discourses in animating the campaign. Whilst much scholarship has discussed the toxicity surrounding representations of immigrants in the campaign (e.g. Clarke et al. 2017, 88; Schimmelfennig 2018) our study shows that toxic representations of femininity and masculinity also played a prominent role in the debate.

The aforementioned lens complicates our understanding of the Brexit campaign, as well as the issues that gained traction during the debates. We argue that the gendered consequences of Brexit cannot be understood outside of these gendered discourses produced in the run-up to the campaign and now ascendant in British public life. By valorising such masculinist traits as national prestige and power (militarism) and the need for tough-talking business attitudes in politics ('deal-making'), these discourses have significant implications with regards to how the

gendered consequences of Brexit are likely to unfold. In the next section we outline our theoretical framework, justifying our focus on gendered discourses through an engagement with critical feminist approaches.

3 TOXIC MASCULINITY: DISCOURSES OF MILITARISM AND DEAL-MAKING

To explore the gendered dynamics of Brexit, we must move beyond liberal feminist categories of representation (male/female) and the ‘gender variable’ and instead scrutinise the language, and systems of meanings, deployed in the referendum campaign as well as in the negotiations that followed. In other words, we need to examine the language of Brexit; following Marysia Zalewski’s injunction to pay attention to the “power and work” that gender is doing in any given discourse (Zalewski 2010, 5). This calls for a critical feminist perspective: one that is able to comprehend the constitutive role of discourses and identities, since “we rely on gender to make sense of ourselves and our world and the complex ways in which the self and world interact” (Shepherd 2017, 23). The conception of gender we advocate is also broad, since “without understanding that gender is at once a noun, a verb, and a logic it is nearly impossible to understand that gender is a relational and dynamic construct that operates in and through other power relations” (Shepherd 2017, 21).

Gendered norms and institutionalised gender bias construct particular representations which themselves constitute identities that establish certain possibilities whilst excluding others (Doty 1996). The study of discursive practices, and in particular discourses that valorise idealized notions of masculinity fix identities in binary, hierarchal, gendered and thus exclusionary and violent orders. As argued by David Duriesmith the history of certain masculinities has “produced the practice of international politics (through the promotion of white rationalism, militarism, etc.), and at the same time the configuration of international relations produces certain kinds of masculinities as individuals look to conform to the configurations that are sanctioned within the world of ‘high’ politics” (Duriesmith 2018). These idealized notions are inherently violent as they produce structural intersectional inequalities. We argue that discourses reflecting toxic masculinities emerged during the Brexit campaign in two distinct ways: through the deployment of language that was associated with militarism, and through language that was associated with business interests and ‘deal-making’ rhetoric. We outline the salience of these discourses below.

Firstly, an analysis of the gendered discourses of Brexit reveals an emphasis on militarist themes, language, values and ideology. Militarism as “an underlying system of institutions, practices, values and cultures” (Sjoberg and Via 2010, 7) is premised, broadly, on “the normalization and legitimation of war” (Stavrianakis 2018, 3). Critical feminists therefore challenge the “artificial construction of boundaries between ‘war’ (one day) and ‘not war’ (the next day)” (Sjoberg and Via 2010, 7) in order to draw attention to the continuum of violence and to highlight how gendered identities and hierarchies sustain militarism in everyday civilian life. Militarist values thus become normalized as the everyday architecture of society operates to sustain its value: from toys, fashion and consumer goods to taxation and sporting events. Militarism has historically valorised traits usually associated with both masculinity and heteronormativity, which are perceived as ‘positive’ qualities: heterosexuality, strength, power, autonomy, resilience, and competence. The logic follows that the deployment of militaristic language, in both overt and covert ways, demonstrates strength and resolve. As an extension of this argument, we highlight that the deployment of militaristic language, and the concomitant conscious and subconscious adoption of militarist values, was evident across the Brexit campaign.

Secondly, in addition to emphasising militarist language, Brexit discourse fixated on the promulgation of market logics and values linked to success in the ‘businessman’s world’. Operating within the public sphere, the spatial domain of the market and the corporate world represents distinctly masculinised spaces, within which “competitive individualism, reason and self-control” are idealised (Hooper 2001). This arena also relies on the reproduction of gendered stereotypes: “Men, operating within a hegemonic normative code, have thought to possess the appropriate skills, knowledge, and temperament to design and maintain the institutions of the state, while most women—assumed to be irrational, fragile, and dependent,—have tended to be relegated to supporting roles as low grade clerks, cleaners, tea ladies, and wives” (Lovenduski 2005, 147). Moreover, given the dominance of the market as a social institution, the resulting masculinity formed within the business arena places men in a “strong position to claim hegemony in the gender order of the societies they dominate” (Connell and Wood 2005). A successful businessman, according to the discourse, equates to a successful leader—someone who “can get the job done” (Lopatka 2017). The rhetorical power of this discourse is evident in contemporary populist claims, from Donald Trump

to Andrej Babiš, who claim that their business acumen will secure a good deal for their country (Capehart 2015, 479–480; *The Guardian* 2017).

An emphasis on military might and businessman-like deal-making have, we argue, been particularly prominent in the Brexit debate, both before and after the referendum. The deployment of business rhetoric, in conjunction with the frequent use of military metaphors in adversarial styles of debates during the Brexit campaign, all of which were articulated in public statements made by politicians—“negotiating [and] pursuing a hard Brexit” to get “Britain firing in all areas again” (May 2016)—linguistically favoured, even if at times subtle and hidden from view, presumptions about masculinity and femininity. The motif created by the repetitive use of this deal-making and militarist language revealed a social category, or ‘ideal type’, through which, we argue, the discourse of a Brexit deal is subsequently being performed. The deployment of business and militarist language—associated with men, masculinity and heteronormativity—not only meant that business priorities would trump gender equality (Guerrina and Masselot 2018) but that ideas associated with masculinity would trump those associated with femininity. The foregoing discourses become evident when unpacking the language that was used across the campaign and in the negotiating forum, revealing a gendering of the elusive ‘Brexit deal’. Deploying such language simultaneously frees the presently ‘unknown’ Brexit deal, its potentially catastrophic consequences and its masculinised ‘action heroes’ from any association with what may be considered feminine values (nurturing a relationship with the EU based on compassion, listening, intellection and emotional responsiveness, say). This binary opposite or ‘other’ to masculinity, although not inherently feminine, is always subordinate to the prevailing masculinity, usually located within the domestic sphere, reinforcing the ‘high politics’/‘low politics’ binary.

4 BREXIT AND THE CULTURE OF BRITISH POLITICS

Britain joined the European Economic Community (EEC), the forerunner to today’s EU, in 1973 under the Conservative government of Edward Heath. The UK had taken the decision to seek membership of the Common Market in the early 1960s, as its economic performance stagnated and as the economies of the original ‘six’ in the EEC raced ahead. Fearing an Anglo-American ‘Trojan horse’ with British accession, French president Charles de Gaulle vetoed applications from Harold

Macmillan in 1963 and Harold Wilson in 1967, and it was only after de Gaulle's replacement by the more moderate Georges Pompidou that the UK was able to join. Attitudes towards European integration in Britain have differed from those on the continent; membership was 'sold' to the British people, instrumentally, to bolster the UK's role in the world and to improve its economic performance (De Burca 2018). The European project was therefore never internalised by much of the population, and support for integration rested upon the EU's ability to deliver for its citizens (Isiksel 2018; Scharpf 1999; Sternberg 2013). Although support for the Common Market crossed party political lines, in the early years opposition came predominantly from Labour, which regarded the EEC as a capitalist project. Harold Wilson, having been elected prime minister in 1974 on a leftist platform, held the first referendum on British membership of the EEC in 1975, in which 67% of the British electorate voted to stay in. This pattern reversed itself somewhat in the 1990s, as pro-European Prime Minister Tony Blair sought to re-orient Labour as the party of the liberal centre, and as the Maastricht Treaty substantially increased the sovereignty cost of EU membership that had so irked right-wing Conservatives in previous decades. From this moment on, the Conservatives remained riven by the Europe question, and efforts by successive leaders, from John Major to David Cameron, to put the matter to rest failed (Martill and Staiger 2018, 6). In doing so, successive leaders were able to capitalise on latent Eurosceptic attitudes among the British population and, more specifically, within the Conservative party itself.

Brexit can therefore be traced back to the elite politics of the political right in the years since the 2008 financial crisis. In consequence, Brexit, as a process, was both instigated, and subsequently led, by a predominantly male and almost exclusively white elite, from a mainly upper-class socio-economic background, whose desires to extend their pre-existing inter-elite conflict led to the creation of the Brexit 'scandal' (Hozic and True 2017). In 2013, Cameron promised a referendum partly to hedge against the rising threat to the Conservative Party's right flank from a rising UKIP and to settle once-and-for all the 'Europe question' that had bedevilled the Tory party since the negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Cameron's decision to hold an in-out referendum reflected a hubristic attitude on his behalf, which was firmly ingrained in his privileged background; he was used to winning and he believed he would be able to pull off another swift victory, thereby cementing his rule over the party (Glencross 2018). Cameron's offer of

a referendum was predicated on the Conservatives winning a majority in the 2015 general election, which they subsequently, albeit narrowly, achieved. His announcement that the referendum would be held on 23 June 2016 offered a unique opportunity for Tory challengers to capitalise upon—and reinforce—growing nationalist, Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant sentiment within the grassroots of the party. Thus, whilst some of the individuals supporting the leave campaign were dyed-in-the-wool Eurosceptics, others—including Cameron’s Old Etonian rival Boris Johnson—had previously indicated support for remaining in the EU and were surprised by all accounts at the eventual victory of the leave campaign (Soubry 2016). The referendum offered the opportunity for would-be challengers both to bolster their rightist credentials and to precipitate a reshuffling of the political chess board.

The Brexit ‘game’ was rooted in a deeper political culture, and gender regime, in the UK that is characterised by adversarialism and conflict drawn from the elite, public school debate culture on which the system was originally based. Reinforced by the persistence of the British ‘class-system’, inequality in the education sector, and even the physical contours of the legislative chamber, this argumentative style of politics was evident throughout debates over Brexit. Support for this interpretation is evident across parties. A Conservative member of the House of Lords noted that British politics “is a system of rivalry [between] two sides. It’s different from the other Member States, where you have got more often coalitions, more often consensus approach... There is quite a big element of ‘rah-rah’ so they are kind of opposing one another with electoral battles in between”.¹ Another interviewee—a UKIP MEP—stated, in Britain “the relationship between government and opposition is childish. It’s characterised by yah-boo politics. There is often an irresponsible lack of consensus and cooperation ... On back and front-benchers, an old saying comes to mind ‘the people opposite us are our opponents, and our enemies are behind us’”.² Moreover, as suggested to us by a former parliamentary representative, “the UK system is designed to have that sort of government-opposition mentality [as] it is even

¹Interview conducted by Benjamin Martill and Anton Gromoczki, House of Lords, 20 July 2017.

²Interview conducted by Oliver Patel and Jose Feio, Brussels, 25 July 2017.

physically designed as a parliament to look like that...in the UK, the system, the politics, the debate can move very quickly, lot of sparring and shouting at each other”.³

It is therefore no coincidence that the decision to hold a referendum, the nature of the campaign itself, and the subsequent leave victory, were all linked to this entrenched system. As one Labour member of the Lords articulated: “Brexit is to a degree a product of the...confrontational culture and a decrease in political representation [which] provides a backdrop in which the negotiations will develop”.⁴ These behavioural norms are part of, and intimately connected to, an established gender regime operating in the House of Commons, characterised by “requirements for masculine dress codes, provision for hanging up one’s sword but not looking after one’s child, admiration for demagoguery and conflict, adversarial styles of debates, a chamber whose acoustics favour loud voices, and the frequent use of military metaphors” (Lovenduski 2005, 147). The public-school debating culture of British politics has had, we argue, important consequences for both the tone, and the nature, of the campaign, especially with regard to the crucial question of who has been empowered to speak. Just as the origins of Brexit lay in the inter-elite politics between privileged white males within the Conservative party, so too did elite white males come to dominate the campaign they had now unleashed onto the British public.

The key protagonists in the Europe debate as it unfolded from 2013 onwards were David Cameron, Nick Clegg, Ed Miliband, and Nigel Farage—all white men who had attended either elite schools, elite universities, or both. In fact, during the campaign, men were afforded 85% of press coverage (Centre for Research in Communication and Culture 2016). Conversely, women were only noticeably present when men wished to discuss ‘women’s’ issues. As Haastrup et al. noted at the time, “the campaign continues to be dominated by male ‘experts’ and a presumption that women will vote on the basis of emotive issues of special interest to them, such as maternity leave policies” (Haastrup et al. 2016). Moreover, this culture provided fertile ground for the continued use of business rhetoric reinforcing ‘deal-making’, and the ability of the UK to

³Interview conducted by Benjamin Martill, Brussels, 19 July 2017.

⁴Interview conducted by Benjamin Martill and Anton Gromoczki, House of Lords, 20 July 2017.

negotiate the best deal for the UK, alongside the frequent deployment of military metaphors. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the discourses used by the two campaigns tapped into traditional ‘male’ concerns—and masculinised politics—regarding security, the market, strength, and the protection of ‘their’ families. This discursive element serves to reinforce existing male dominance of politics by associating male traits with those issue-areas and priorities deemed most ‘important’ for the country. The dominance of male ‘experts’ in determining the course of the Brexit campaign owed as much to the discourse of ‘high politics’ as it does to the entrenched positions held by males in British politics. As Haastrup et al. argued in the run-up to the vote, “issues pertaining to ‘high politics’—security and defence, and the economy—have remained squarely the prerogative of men. As a result, when women’s voices and expertise have been included, it has been to speak about social politics and policies” (Haastrup et al. 2016). For issues that were considered to be not directly applicable to ‘women’, women were side-lined in the debate and effectively silenced. This was compounded for women from minority groups who were also silenced by their immigration status—despite, according to Hozić and True, the fact that “austerity politics and global chains of migrant labour” are aspects upon which the UK economy depends (Hozić and True 2017, 271).

5 THE CAMPAIGN DISCOURSE: ‘MAKE BRITAIN GREAT AGAIN’

The 1975 referendum campaign was overtly gendered, sexist and sexualised. One noteworthy offering from the 1975 campaign, published in the *British European*, featured a page three model in a Union Jack bikini accompanied by the headline ‘Europe is Fun’, and a secondary headline entitled: “More Work and More Play Too!” (Payne 2017). Another choice offering from the ‘in’ campaign, this time from the Liberal Party, invited the reader to “say yes to a liberal Europe...For your family’s sake”, claiming EEC membership offered ‘dad’ “a bigger say at work with a share in his firm’s profit” and ‘mum’ “a rising standard of living with secure food supplies” (Liberal Party 1975). Similar narratives were also elements of the ‘out’ campaign. “Housewives”, one leaflet from the National Referendum Campaign stated, “are paying more and more hard-earned cash for fewer and fewer goods” because of the EEC (National Referendum Campaign 1975) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Young man and woman holding pro-membership campaign material from the *British European*, the paper of the pro-EEC European Movement, 1971 Image © CN Media Group. Reprinted with permission

This overt sexism was replaced in the 2016 campaign with a more insidious—yet just as problematic—gendered discourse emphasising militarism and ‘deal-making’. In a sign of clearly changed times, the literature in the 2016 campaign made no explicit references to “mums” or “housewives”, nor did either campaign deem it appropriate to make scantily dressed women part of their message. Rather, the 2016 campaign was gendered, we argue, in a different respect, for the discourse surrounding the referendum—particularly, though not exclusively, that of the leave campaign—made prominent a number of gendered themes linked specifically to militarism and market-oriented discourses. Specifically, discourses cohered around notions of strength, security, global power, and the protection of vulnerable women. These gendered discourses are no less damaging than the ‘overt’ sexism of the 1975 campaign; insofar as they represent these themes as gender neutral, these

discourses are more insidious, and therefore potentially more dangerous. The two recurring elements, which emerged mainly from the pro-Brexit campaign, we argue, are a preoccupation with British military strength and power (militarism) and a belief in the importance of the application of business skills to the conduct of politics ('deal-making'). Understanding these discourses is critical to understanding Brexit.

To begin with, militarist discourses largely played out against the background of Britain's assumed global role, the product of its power, prestige and (unsubtly venerated) history of colonial rule. Much of this discourse harked back to a supposedly 'better time': "What we achieve by voting LEAVE", one leaflet from the right-wing Bruges Group noted, is "a better vision for Britain's future, in control of our own global affairs" (Bruges Group 2016). The 'vision' of Leave.EU, in its campaign material, was to "leave the European Union. Restore the country's power over its laws. Save £12bn of taxpayers' money. Build stronger ties with the rest of the world" (Leave.EU 2016a). The Better Off Out campaign, meanwhile, emphasised the importance of Britain's history: "Stonehenge and medieval cathedrals speak of antiquity, while our parliaments demonstrate our democratic heritage and the great castles remind us of our unconquered military heritage" (Better off Out 2016). The Conservatives' leave campaign argued for "an optimistic global view of Britain", claiming "we would both gain influence and prosper outside an unreformed EU" (Conservatives for Britain 2016a), while Labour's argued it was "time to leave the EU and join the World" (Labour Leave 2016). Underpinning much of the pro-free-market discourse of the leave campaign, moreover, was this emphasis on Britain's return to the global order, jettisoning the parochialism of its decades-long European dalliance. Grassroots Out, evoking a collective 'we', stated they were in favour of leaving the EU "to allow us to make our own laws in our own country [and] to allow British businesses to trade freely across the world" (Grassroots Out 2016). Vote Leave, for their part, argued a post-Brexit Britain would be "free to trade with the whole world" (Vote Leave 2016a).

The second prominent gendered theme in the referendum discourse lies, we argue, in the embrace of a market discourse and the valorisation of business skills and 'deal-making' in the conduct of politics.⁵ The Conservatives for Britain campaign, for example, argued that "Britain

⁵It should be noted, perhaps unsurprisingly, that support for the free-market did not feature in the campaigns. From the Labour ('Labour Leave') and Green ('Green Leave')

needs a better deal from the EU...Britain needs fundamental change so that we can control our borders, trade freely around the world and return power to Parliament to block harmful EU rules” (Conservatives for Britain 2016b). Leave.EU, for its part, argued that “with its right to strike deals restored, the UK will be able to gain better access to those markets that buy most of our goods and services” (Leave.EU 2016b). The Vote Leave campaign noted that “the UK has no trade deals with important countries like China, India and Australia. If we vote to remain in the EU, we won’t be able to make our own deals” (Vote Leave 2016a). Another leaflet noted the “UK isn’t allowed to negotiate our own trade deals...Instead of making a deal which is best for the UK, we have to wait for 27 other countries to agree it” (Vote Leave 2016b). Tim Martin, the Eurosceptic boss of pub chain J.D. Wetherspoon who campaigned openly for a leave vote, suggested the UK’s relations with the EU should mirror the logic of firms, noting “if we [the UK and EU] can’t agree on a deal, then we’ll find another supplier. It sounds harsh, but that’s business and that’s trade...It cannot be seriously suggested that the French, Germans and others will wish to cease trading with us or will be able to afford to” (Martin 2016, 3).

6 AFTER THE VOTE: THE BREXITER WORLDVIEW ASCENDENT

The leave campaign emphasised certain recurring themes in its effort to convince voters they would be better off if the UK left the EU. These repeatedly emphasised norms centred on national power and prestige, the benefits of the free market, and the need for good deal-making vis-à-vis the EU and the wider world. Together these elements cohered into a simple message: Without the EU, Britain is free to head out into the wider world and strike deals with whomever ‘we’ please. Equating statecraft with market oriented, businessman-like values and thus individuality and choice, creates a discourse that reinforces what Cynthia Enloe describes as the “connective tissues” of patriarchy: the “large and small, subtle and blatant forms of racialised sexism, gendered misogyny and masculinised privileged” (Enloe 2017, ix-x). This valorises ideas associated with masculinity at the heart of politics and claims to sovereignty

campaigns, which focused instead upon the EU’s treatment of Greece, its support for ‘tax-dodging multinationals’, and its contribution to insecurity in the East (e.g. Labour Leave 2016; Green Leaves 2016).

which, given the green light, ride roughshod over ideas that either challenge or call an end to this business-as-usual politics. Moreover, the discourse taps into a latent nostalgia for the British Empire and the power and control it afforded the colonisers—both economic and otherwise, subsequently reinforcing the persistent and dogged connections to historical and contemporary racisms, sexism and classism. Talk of trade and power, for example, “melancholically recall[s] British imperial and colonial rhetoric...Fantasy-imperialism thus meshes with anti-globalisation sentiment—the macho national dominance that will supposedly quell global feminisation” (Cain 2016, 1).

The leave victory heralded the rise, in many respects, of the Brexiter worldview propounded by the (right-wing) leave campaign over the months preceding the vote. This was reinforced by Theresa May’s insistence, upon taking over the Conservative leadership and premiership from David Cameron, that ‘Brexit means Brexit’. In confirming that the UK would leave the EU and, moreover, would not accept any solution in which Britain remained in ‘through the back door’, May indicated that a compromise—or a ‘soft Brexit’—was off the table as far as HM Government was concerned. Moreover, May moved to institutionalise the Brexit process, establishing the Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU), appointing leave supporters to lead key departments, including the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) (Boris Johnson), the Department for International Trade (DIT) (Liam Fox) and DExEU (David Davis), as well as triggering—after a lengthy legal battle—Article 50 itself on 29 March 2017. In her Lancaster House speech of 17 January, in which she responded to growing pressure to make clear her plans for Brexit, May outlined her vision of Britain as “a great global trading nation” (Martill 2017a). By confirming that the UK would not accept the free movement of persons or the supremacy of EU law, and by strongly hinting that contributions into the future EU budget would be problematic, May all but precluded a ‘softer’ form of Brexit being achieved. By aping the rhetoric of Vote Leave and UKIP—of a strong global Britain—she further contributed to the promulgation of the deal-making discourse. “No deal”, she (in)famously declared, “is better than a bad deal” (May 2017). In her keenness to emphasise this stark, and reductive, dichotomy, May used the word ‘deal’ 16 times in her speech (Jackson-Preece 2017). Such was the extent to which May appropriated the discourse of the ‘Brexiters’ that Nigel Farage tweeted in response that he could “hardly believe that the PM is now using the

phrases and words that I've been mocked for using for years" (Farage 2017). As the negotiations began, David Davis summed up the purpose of the talks succinctly: "Michel and I are both going for a good deal" (*The Independent* 2017).

The first round of negotiations began on 19 June 2017, with David Davis leading the UK delegation in talks with the EU's Michel Barnier and his team, who had been afforded a strict mandate by the European Council. Controversially, and very visibly, only one woman was appointed to the British negotiating team. Whilst this was, for some, a reflection of "the fact that while most civil servants are female, and 11% are from ethnic minorities" (Branigan 2017), it invited the predictable response that the UK government was sidelining women in the Brexit process, and falling back on antiquated, exclusionary and elitist modes of conducting politics (Achilleos-Sarll 2017; O'Brien 2017). Throughout the negotiations the hostile rhetoric against the EU externally and so-called "remoaners" domestically also continued unabated. Whilst the former has been depicted as a bullying external other, the latter have been portrayed as illegitimate obstructionists. Pro-Brexit Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg depicted Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker as "a pound shop Bismarck, arrogant and bullying but without the charm", noting that "[h]e has nothing to intimidate us with and the British people always stiffen their sinews when threatened" (Politico 2017). Leave Means Leave, a pro-Brexit pressure group, meanwhile, urged "those who supported Remain not to seek to delay, obstruct or dilute the Brexit process—but to accept the verdict of the British people and embrace the huge opportunities on the horizon for a free and independent United Kingdom" (Leave Means Leave 2018).

Militarist themes, moreover, underlay many of these claims, and in some cases was made plainly explicit. Reacting to claims Brexit could challenge the British claim to sole sovereignty of Gibraltar, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon suggested that the UK would be prepared to use military force to defend the territory, while former Conservative leader Michael Howard drew a parallel between Britain's retention of Gibraltar and its defence of the Falkland Islands in the 1982 conflict (Williams 2017). Nostalgia for British military might also saturates the discourse, as attested by the frequent analogies between Brexit and the Dunkirk evacuation of 1940. As Emile Simpson has argued: "If the cultural roots of Brexit are reduced to one sentiment, it is that

Britain did not win two world wars to be run by Germany via Brussels” (Simpson 2017). While Nigel Farage exhorted his followers to watch the Christopher Nolan movie *Dunkirk*, a pro-Brexit commentary in the Daily Telegraph argued: “For Brexit to work, we need Dunkirk spirit not ‘Naysaying Nellies’” (Pearson 2017).

Time and again this rhetoric valorised strength at the negotiating table and sought to portray concessions and compromise as weak and inferior. Towards the end of 2017, considerable support emerged on the Conservative right to prepare for a ‘no deal’ scenario, in which the UK would exit the EU without any agreement on the terms of its withdrawal. This was viewed by some on the right as a goal in and of itself—a clean break from Brussels—whilst for others preparing for such a scenario was seen as a means of bolstering the credibility of British claims that they would “walk away from the table” if offered anything less than a comprehensive free trade agreement. Nigel Farage argued, for instance, that a no deal scenario “would hurt Europe far more than it would hurt us (BBC News 2018). Even Cabinet ministers seemed to endorse an open attitude towards ‘no deal’, with Liam Fox claiming that “[l]eaving without a deal would not be the Armageddon that people project” (*EU Observer* 2018). Even following the conclusion of the first round of negotiations, and the acceptance of the preliminary agreement by the European Council on 15 December, there was still considerable pressure from within the Conservative party for Theresa May to reject any transition deal and ‘fight’ against demands from Brussels that the UK maintain freedom of movement for EU citizens. The discussion of the ‘no deal’ scenario highlighted the pernicious link between deal-making and militarism that lies at the heart of the Brexiter ideology: Britain will use its power and prestige to force concessions from the EU, negotiating from a position of strength to obtain a better deal for the British people.

Whilst it may not be surprising that the emphasis on deal-making increased as the Brexit negotiations loomed, it is necessary to bear in mind the specific nature of this discourse, which not only conceptualised the negotiations themselves as an exercise in bargaining and deal-making, but also stressed the need for a strong individual as the best means to achieve this. The assumptions underlying this view, made explicit in other public utterances by Cabinet ministers and in Conservative campaigning material, was that the exercise was a zero-sum affair in which the EU was to be seen as the adversary and in which the distributional gains and losses would fall along national lines. The discourse

also promulgated the ideal of strength, portraying this as the most significant attribute Britain needed in order to get its own way (Martill 2017b). The obsession with the projection of strength lay behind May's (much-mocked) depiction of her administration as 'strong and stable'. In other words, the negotiations were treated as a hard-hitting business deal rather than a gentle act of strategic diplomacy aimed at obtaining a mutually amicable (and beneficial) withdrawal. The discourse embraced macho values of strength and portrayed the negotiations as an all-or-nothing scenario.

7 THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE MILITARIST AND DEAL-MAKING DISCOURSES

The discourse underlying the leave campaign and now ascendant in the Brexit process—valorising militarism and deal-making—are likely to have profound consequences for the manner in which Brexit unfolds and, subsequently, in terms of the gendered outcomes of the process. In this final section we outline four distinct consequences of this discourse: the contribution towards a 'harder' Brexit; the consolidation of free-market norms and retrenchment of social policies; the diversion of attention from domestic to the international distributional consequences; and the persistent under-representation of women and minority groups in politics. In each of these respects, the real-world consequences of these masculinist discourses—toxic as they are in themselves—will prove more damaging for women, and minority groups, than for the white male electorate.

Firstly, these masculinist discourses preclude the possibility of achieving an outcome of the Brexit negotiations based on dialogue, equality, empathy, care and other-regardingness, all values which would be needed in order to maintain beneficial political linkages across the continent and prevent the social consequences of a damaging 'hard' Brexit. As we have demonstrated above, discourses of militarism and deal-making both push in the direction of a hard-line negotiating strategy, one that portrays the talks as a zero-sum bargaining game in which losses are to the advantage of the 'adversary' and in which concessions and compromise are viewed as feminine—and, therefore, undesirable—traits. Given the requirement for some form of compromise and the benefits that will accrue to both sides through participation in EU programmes—or perhaps even

the EU's internal market—such a hard-line approach is misguided. The brinkmanship justified under such slogans as ‘from a position of strength’ and ‘getting the best deal’ is likely to bring about a harder Brexit than a more conciliatory approach to the negotiations, and this will have important implications for UK and EU citizens.

Secondly, the individualist worldview inherent in these discourses—emphasising strength, self-reliance and decisive leadership—delegitimises policies based around the collective defence of common welfare, including social policies designed to support child rearing and other forms of care falling outside traditional definitions of ‘work’. This is, moreover, likely to be reinforced by the aforementioned move towards a ‘hard Brexit’, given the protection afforded to women by EU directives and regulations in recent years, and the UK's consistent opposition to both EU encroachment on member state policies in this area, and to the promotion of ‘anti-competitive’ welfare policies (Guerrina and Masselot 2018, 9). As evidence of the likely shift, the UK government's damaging austerity policies, implemented from 2010 onwards, have disproportionately affected women—and especially Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women—by cutting public sector employment and depriving lone parents (predominantly women) of welfare and support (O'Brien 2017; Sandhu and Stephenson 2015). Thus, the move towards a hard Brexit and the dominance of masculinist rhetoric together make more likely a ramping up of the business-friendly, neoliberal economic policy of the past three decades, and presage a concomitant reduction in the willingness of the government to provide sufficient support for social welfare programmes and policies.

Thirdly, the emphasis of masculinist discourses on national strength and prestige diverts attention to the international at the expense of the domestic, and in doing so occludes discussion of the distributional consequences of Brexit. Just as GDP figures—beloved by proponents of the free-market—convey only aggregate national growth, and not the distributional imbalances that may be lurking underneath, so too does a focus on *national* success necessarily come at the expense of attention to *domestic* consequences. These are likely to be more damaging for women than they are for men, not least since “the role of the EU as a gender actor is largely undisputed [and] equality policies are now one of the most widely developed areas of European social policy” (Guerrina and Murphy 2016, 874). Masculinist pro-Brexit discourses reinforce spatialised boundaries between the international, national, domestic and local,

as well as between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics—the oft-drawn distinction in foreign affairs discourses between important (‘high politics’) questions of international security on the one hand and mere domestic, social, affairs (‘low politics’) on the other—whereby gender has effectively been subsumed under discussions about women’s employment or maternity rights, thus relegating women to the domain of social policy, thought to be confined to the ‘domestic’ sphere despite the fact that gendered consequences will be felt across all sectors of British society.

Fourthly, the dominance of discourses valorising strength and deal-making, by reinforcing stereotypes of ‘maleness’ and ‘manliness’, undercut efforts to afford women and minority groups greater representation in the corridors of power. By portraying the male archetype as the only means of achieving the ‘best deal’, perspectives that cut across a spectrum of identities are correspondingly delegitimised. This is evident already in the frequent criticisms of Theresa May as a ‘weak individual’—however perilous her parliamentary situation—and in the lack of female representation on the British negotiating team. The story of May’s premiership to date belies any narrative of female empowerment; derided by her party as a ‘weak’ leader and struggling to command the requisite authority to govern, May’s ascension is more a reminder that women “reach positions of leadership at precarious or risky times” (Hozić and True 2017, 276) than it is an indication that a corner has been turned. In response, May has sought to associate herself with ostensibly ‘male’ values, with her aforementioned emphasis on strength and stability an obvious case in point. The lack of representation more generally is a stark reminder that women remain marginalised, excluded and silenced within British politics and, furthermore, that some women—namely those who reside outside the elite, remain more marginalised than others. Underrepresentation is both a metaphor and a reminder of the circulating gendered discourses in European and British politics adversely affecting women and minority groups.

8 CONCLUSION: CRITICAL FEMINISM, TOXIC MASCULINITY, AND BREXIT

A critical feminist lens focuses attention on areas currently excluded, or ignored, by mainstream theories and positivist epistemologies. Post-positivist and feminist critiques challenge such exclusions, androcentric biases, and gendered and racialised hierarchies, both from within the

discipline of IR, and within the discourse and practice of global politics. According to Peterson “feminist scholarship offers many resources for rethinking ‘givens’, redrawing boundaries, and re-visioning our horizons” (Peterson 1992, 191). This being the case, we have argued in this chapter that scholars need to pay particular attention to the discourses surrounding the Brexit campaign in order to fully comprehend the consequences of the vote. And, whilst there is a growing literature on Brexit that takes seriously the need for a gendered perspective, we have argued these have not fully succeeded in accounting for the role played by gendered discourses in the campaign. Works on public opinion, whilst taking seriously the need to analyse the campaign and to include a focus on gender, have remained wedded to liberal feminist ontologies that do not offer a sufficiently deep conception of gender. Critical feminist works, in contrast, whilst offering a more theoretically nuanced account of the relationship between gender, power and neo-liberalism, have had little to say about the dominant discourses in the campaign.

By drawing on critical feminist theory and undertaking analysis of the writings of the pro-Brexit campaign in the UK, we have argued that the campaign and the subsequent negotiations have been dominated by a toxic masculinity that manifested in two particular ways. Firstly, through the deployment of language that was associated with militarism and, secondly, through language associated with deal-making and business rhetoric. Based on a worldview of power, militarism and winner-take-all competitiveness, this Brexit discourse views Britain’s EU membership as a challenge to its global power and prestige and a restraint on its free-trading ambitions, and equates the Brexit negotiations with high-powered business talks rather than acts of diplomacy, valorising strength in the face of the (European) adversary. These discourses gathered strength in the run-up to the referendum, such that the result was a decision to leave the EU, and they have become highly influential since the vote, with the rhetoric of Theresa May’s Conservative administration contributing to the masculinist Brexiteer worldview and its obsession with strength, stability and ‘deal making’. We therefore must remain cognizant of these prevailing discourses, which rely on old-new gendered norms and hierarchies.

Looking forward, we have isolated four potential consequences of these discourses: the increasing likelihood of a ‘harder’ Brexit; the consolidation of free-market and neo-liberal norms and the corresponding retrenchment of welfare and social policies; the diverting of attention

away from the distributional consequences of Brexit at the domestic level; and the continued underrepresentation of women, and minority groups, in British and European politics. Drawing attention to these potential consequences, and the gendered discourses upon which they rely, goes some way to challenge current, and mainstream, analyses of Brexit with the intention to offer a counter narrative in order to highlight and to disrupt dominant structures of power.

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