



BE-LEAVE IN BREXIT

*Post-truth and the quest for Identity within the British Online Farming
Community*



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BY ELIOT JONES

Supervised by Bram Buscher

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Preface

The following thesis is on the subject of agricultural governance and the British withdrawal from the European Union (EU). The in-depth investigation has grown out of my interest in agricultural politics, both globally and in my home country of the United Kingdom. My recent studies in sustainability and its influence on politics have led me to produce this work, drawing these passions into a single, coherent document.

Agriculture is, for me, a recent but life changing vocation. I finished secondary education seemingly without goals or vision. An unexpected opportunity to work in farming awakened in me a passion and drive not experienced before. This has given me the opportunity to see the world in a different light and, following further education in the field, to appreciate and utilise my academic skills in an area of study that actually makes sense to me. That first day on the farm has led me to explore, study and accomplish things that I would not have considered possible in my life prior to this time.

During my studies in the subject of agriculture, I have made it my mission to experience as far as possible the vast array of practices and products on offer across the UK. I have been repeatedly struck by the peculiar approach many farmers take toward environmentalism, the economy and those institutions that regulate them through the European Union (EU).

As an academic, I had assumed that I am fairly well versed in such matters; on brief observation of those running agricultural businesses, however, I soon found my own knowledge quite inadequate. Superficially, the way in which British agricultural stewards handle their obligations to trade and the environment are seemingly impeccable. Everything that I have been taught and more is fully embraced; environmental conservation is embodied into the action of farming.

In any circumstance where institutional regulation has intervened and, as such, farmers have been forced to comply in order to receive their subsidy, it seems that only the bare minimum has been fulfilled. Speaking from personal experience, I have witnessed multiple occasions of senseless neglect of good practice; the burning and dumping of refuse, the slaughter of unfit animals, land designated as biodiversity set aside used instead for access roads and various other serious misdemeanours designed to 'play the system' of EU trade, health, safety and environmental regulation. Perhaps foolishly on my part, this came as a surprise to me since the majority of farmers rely on these measures to receive subsidies and survive financially. This relationship with the EU has not only led to a stagnation in quality and sustainability of production, but a ubiquitous scapegoating of the institution. Any on-farm problem can be blamed on the way the EU controls labour (immigration), trade (prices) and subsidies (environmentalism and animal welfare), absolving all personal responsibility, negating a progressive perspective.

I have observed first-hand the political dissent which culminated in the June 2016 UK-EU referendum. The eventual choice to withdraw has drastically affected me both personally and professionally as a student with ambitions in advanced education in Europe and in an industry that has taken a drastic turn in an unexpected direction. The aforementioned grumblings had manifested into total rejection; farmers had voted to leave the EU.

The British agricultural industry will undoubtedly change substantially due to this decision. Considering the minimal political swing held by the farming community, it will likely be marginalised to financial interest; the relatively unprofitable traditional farming community undermined by landowning, environmental and corporate lobbyists. Due to the natural affinity for farming in England, I am interested to study the strategies and desires of farmers with an

interest in the Brexit debate in order to produce an alternative scope, leaving aside the ineffective and damaging policies. This work will, I hope, provide a ground for an egalitarian, truly political voice, in shaping the future of British agricultural governance.

To find that voice, I have pursued what has come to be a powerful and significant agent in both agricultural politics and more generally; online social media. There are ongoing debates as to whether websites like Facebook, Twitter or *The Farming Forum*, the central site of this study, lead to greater or less democracy. The repercussions of such are undoubtedly evident in the outcome of the aforementioned Brexit campaign, however, it is yet unclear whether this is a result of genuine political action or something more dubious. It is the scope of this thesis to investigate said platforms and their role in supporting a Leave vote; to deconstruct the argument held therein to discover what lies at the heart of this dissent.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Online spaces have emerged as a defining political force in the 21st century. A vast spectrum of once disconnected groups use the internet to create networks that transcend physical boundaries, forging new communities and, in doing so, asserting, themselves politically. This study takes one of these groups, participants of online agricultural fora concentrated within the UK, and analyses the way in which they approached the 2016 UK-EU referendum. The focal point of research will be *The Farming Forum* (TFF) (www.thefarmingforum.co.uk), a British based discussion group with a large membership, covering a range of aspects from trade to relationships.

1.1 Research Problem

The British farming community is a small but contentious sub-culture within the United Kingdom. Rural farmers are somewhat isolated from the rest of the country geographically; in 2010, over 90% of Britons lived in cities (Guardian, 2017). Equally, they have little political swing; as of 2013, whilst some wealthier players still own large parts of the country, in general farmers represented less than 1% of the total workforce. In the recent 2016 UK-EU referendum, however, they have professed and represented much of the extreme debate that led to a wave of unprecedented populism and the impending “Brexit¹”.

The British relationship with the EU has long been unsteady. Since inclusion into the European Economic Commission in 1973, the British government has remained stubbornly peripheral to certain sanctions and terms of membership. This scepticism finally came to the fore in the June 2016 referendum when the British public voted to leave the EU.

The “leave²” campaign was infamous for a hyper-sensitive, emotive form of politics, adopting unsubstantiated facts and figures to suggest the futility of the EU as an institution for the UK. This was epitomised by “£350 million a week for the National Health Service”, a claim widely denied by experts and proven dubious when removed from the Leave website the morning after polling results were collected. The UK was alleged to be ‘losing’ vast sums of tax payers’ money to the EU, including their contribution to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

The CAP has been the dominant driver for UK farming practices since the Second World War. It was certainly effective in Europe’s struggle out of post war poverty and is the essential basis for the agricultural prosperity we enjoy today. This has been achieved through high subsidies, incentivised development and strict regulation of production and prices (Gosden, 2016). Considering that over 55% of UK farm income depends on these supplements (Gosden, 2016), it seemed counterintuitive that an overwhelming majority of farmers would choose to reject the institutions that provides for them in the 2016 EU referendum (31% Remain, 58% Leave (Whitfield & Marshall, 2017)). Still, farmers voted to bite the hand that has fed them for some time.

In this study I will seek to build on the work of Whitfield and colleagues (2017) who have attempted to tackle this problem through policy analysis and ethnographic study. They took an interdisciplinary approach into “defining and delivering” sustainable agriculture following Brexit.

¹ Brexit – a term compiled of ‘Britain’ and ‘Exit’ used to describe the EU-UK referendum of 2016

² Leave and Remain will be written as such in reference to their political campaign titles.

They argue that the current means of complex trade-offs and multifaceted techniques provide a solid knowledge base for further sustainable practices. Having completed an impressive retrospective review of CAP reform and its efficacy in the field, they have extensively revised the literature regarding structural developments.

Their research, however, does not deal with political motivations. While they explicitly consider the policy, perception and narrative concerning agricultural stewardship, there is no consideration of the agricultural industry's leaning towards Brexit in the first place. Their work points out the superficial CAP flaws, in a permissive manner without adjudicating the root of these policies or considering whether they were ever in the best interests of those that nevertheless voted for them. Furthermore, their conclusions suggest a reformation of the current terms of governance (highly bureaucratic, interventionist) to a more "British" model, appeasing Brexit's superficial rhetoric, making no attempt to diagnose this rejection of Europe other than preference for governance to come from Westminster rather than Brussels. This begs the question whether the rural farming community really wanted a fundamental change and, if so, what shape that change would take (Whitfield 2017).

It appears that, in the existing literature, few attempts have been made to study the antagonisms that led farmers to vote to Leave. If these underlying needs are not met, it is unlikely the political dissent that became so evident in this referendum will subside. The future of British agriculture is undoubtedly under threat of collapse considering the portion of subsidised income it receives from the EU (Gosden, 2016). The salience of the issue, therefore, is clear; the British legislature must conceive a plan superior to the CAP or risk facing the same resistance.

Never before has a nation as wealthy and agriculturally developed as the UK had the chance to re-engineer their entire structure of agricultural governance (FT, 2016). While the literature suggests that little change will take place, merely a continuation of the same stagnant policies, I contend that, with an impending ecological crisis and repetitive price crashes in the dairy, grain and meat industries (Gosden 2016), a serious rethink is in order. Therefore, it is essential to study the main political antagonisms within the community, whether that be control of resources, access to supplementary income, environmental regulation, price fixing or land tenure (Whitfield & Marshall, 2017), and how these may be addressed to determine why and how withdrawal from the EU could be the answer to this agricultural calamity.

In order to tackle this gap in research I pursued an empirical study into the deep-set political dialogue and rhetoric of British farmers. To meet with as great a sample study as possible and in keeping with one of the most pertinent means of communicating such politics, I have undertaken an online ethnography or "netnography" of the culture, customs, habits, and mutual differences of said farmers. Much of the political exchange that has resulted in the election of President Donald Trump in the USA and the Brexit vote is attributed to social media (Ballatore, 2016). The way in which online communities share and indulge certain forms of news media has produced an array of deeply political phenomena; from fake news to record breaking polling results among young people (Ballatore 2016, Strauss 2012).

A study of online media provokes fundamental questions as to how human actors can gather and perform as a social and political collective. For example, Benjamin Krämer (2017) argues that online fora have been instrumental in producing waves of unprecedented populism; this culture of media consumption has allowed extreme politics to foster unabated and at great speed. This is evident in the aforementioned landslide victory for the leave campaign within the agricultural community and it is certainly interesting to see how this may be attributed to their affiliation with social media.

The development of online politics introduces a further dilemma to this thesis. The internet era has come to be known as one of 'post truth'; a time in which expert knowledge is constantly under scrutiny and the factual basis for knowledge more generally is of secondary importance to emotive sentiment (Hopkin & Rosamond, 2017). In such instances, the 'politics' is of less concern compared to the 'political' discussion at hand which is perhaps why previous studies have fallen short. Not accounting for the ephemeral antagonistic style of debate as a variable may cause any researcher to overlook this visceral and emotional political dimension. By acknowledging this phenomenon, I aim to make up where my predecessors have become lost in the discursive breadth of Brexit. I venture to explore how and why controversies of this nature arise rather than considering the superficial, complex and distorted half-truths they refute.

Thus, I have pursued a netnography of TFF and the actors who participate in political discussion therein. In keeping with the arguments made above, I hope to provide a novel scope, a broad sample population and address a very recent and understudied phenomenon.

TFF site is primarily used for trade and exchange of knowledge but often descends into debate. Certain areas of the site are dedicated to standalone political topics. There is a subsection dedicated solely to Brexit, entitled "*We're out, so wtf do we do now?*", which will be the starting point for this thesis which will then move more widely through the forum and other online spaces.

By studying this specific community in relation to Brexit, observing the way in which politics has given way to populism (or not) and in what circumstances, I seek to draw conclusions as to why and how this has seemingly provoked farmers to reject one of their main sources of income, acting to their detriment for limited apparent reasons.

1.2 Research Questions

The following questions are an amalgamation of the problems outlined above, reformulated for the purpose of inducing research. The general research question (GRC) will be the broad outline of the entire thesis, whereas, the proceeding specific research questions (SRQ) will provide the basis for chapters 2, 3 and 4 accordingly.

GRQ: *How does thefarmingforum.co.uk reveal British farmers' political standing with regard to the Brexit debate and what are the strategies and motivations of said farmers for post-EU agricultural governance?*

SRQ1: *How has thefarmingforum.co.uk developed over time in relation to agricultural governance reform?*

SRQ2: *How was Brexit conceived within thefarmingforum.co.uk and how have farmers therein dealt with political difference and or coalition?*

SRQ3: *How does this disclose strategies for post-Brexit governance and how does this relate to diffusion of politics through social media?*

1.3 Methodology

Ethnographic study has been the basis for anthropology among other disciplines for over a century. Netnography, however, is a relatively new methodology, specifically collecting data from online sources. Born out of market and consumer research, it is gaining greater popularity among the wider social sciences (Gilchrist 2011). Netnography has given access to the unique forms of interaction and community building found in online spaces, bringing a new perspective to how the social is manifested, particularly that surrounding politics. The internet is a platform where socially marginalised actors can connect, enhance social capital, debate, engage and be heard (Svensson 2013)(Jackson 2013).

Use of social media among UK farmers is a rapidly growing phenomena; agricultural marketing board Social:Farmers believes the number will exceed 90% using online platforms by 2023 (SF 2017). *The Guardian* claims that use of *Instagram* hashtags has been instrumental in gathering support for a fairer milk price in 2012 and quelling much of the anger around the recent badger cull debate (Gray 2014). Farmers have very little free time to have critical debate on a broad scale and, therefore, politics takes place during small hours of recreation or through mobile phones on social media platforms (TFF has a significant running thread on this topic). The agricultural community is evidently going “online” and, given this information, a netnography poses an interesting lens to observe dissension in contemporary agricultural politics.

TFF has over 20,000 followers on twitter and 27,000 active members, representing 5.8% of the total UK agricultural workforce as of June 2016, across the spectrum from landowners to migrant labourers (DEFRA 2016). In comparison to its greatest competitor, the British Farming Forum (<http://farmingforum.co.uk/forums/forum.php>), it has over 3 times as many daily visitors, twice the average duration of visit and is less than half its age (FRO 2017). The website has gained recent fame for providing free, online advice for the Single Payment Scheme, a highly bureaucratic process of subsidy approval dominated by paid farm advisors (Berrys 2014). The content of its discussion and debate has been quoted in popular newspapers; *The Guardian* printed segments of a heated argument concerning European governance of soil management schemes (Monbiot 2014). This is both an influential and well-regarded platform.

A growing body of literature has produced a basic methodology for approaching internet fora through participant observation, content analysis and online interviews (Svensson 2013). According to Kozinets, 1000 pages of double space text is sufficient for completing such an analysis (Svensson 2013) yet this is arguably relative to the source, its context and the quality of the text. Although, this should not be an issue considering the provocative nature of the debate. To quote the website administrator, “*There has nothing in the short history of TFF brought about more discussion than the BREXIT debate*” (TFF 2016). Now in the aftermath of Brexit, 15 months after the referendum (the starting date of this study: October 2017), one might expect discussion to have frittered away, however, due to its uncertain nature, heated debate remains more contentious than ever.

Beginning on October 5th, 2017, I spent four months collecting qualitative, empirical data. The first step was to create an online alias and register with the website. I intended to minimise my influence on the TFF members during this process, at least in the initial stages, observing alone rather than manipulating the given community. Kozinets (2010) ascribes, however, that the greater the involvement and participation of the researcher, the greater the cultural understanding. It was important that I maintain a high ethical standard so I informed both the

website manager and those participating, and gained their permission (Svensson 2010). In addition, I called myself “Eliot researcher”, so as to remain totally transparent, although, as Svensson (2014) comments, given the nature of these fora and the amount of information displayed for the entire internet to see, the platform users may not expect their discussions to be private. In fact, during the process I came into contact with four other researchers with a variety of topics and goals. This saturation of researchers, ‘bots’³ and other surveillance means that members operate well in the knowledge of the constant presence of watching eyes thereby minimizing the effect of any particular participation bias on my account.

Having satisfied myself that the participant risk was minimised, I immersed myself in the community, gaining an understanding of participants’ reality, culture and life-world in great detail (Svensson 2014). I needed to begin with an entry which, according to Kozinets (2010), should be provocative, interesting and be a definitive starting point for data collection. Therefore, I introduced myself to TFF discussion with the following statement:

“Dear TFF members

My name is Eliot Jones, I am from Dorset, England. I obtained a first-class BSc in International Agriculture from Greenwich University in 2016. I am now undertaking an MSc at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. I am currently beginning research for my thesis and am now reaching out to you to request your participation.

I am interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the Brexit debate in relation to both the agricultural community and online social media platforms. This forum presents a very interesting case for political exchange within a demographic that has a significant stake in the outcome of upcoming negotiations with the EU. In my own extensive research of the best academic attempts at assessing EU and UK CAP reform and their diagnosis for the future, I have failed to find any political motivation for or against Brexit.

The landslide of British farmers voting to leave the EU, some estimate as high as 70%, has indicated a severe dissatisfaction with the current means of governance. In the 15 months since the referendum, however, this has not been reflected by UK policy makers.

It is my objective to study the way in which TFF members espouse their political preferences regarding post-Brexit agriculture. Once finished, I intend to collect and produce a list of recommendations based on my findings.

I will conduct this research with total anonymity; all participants will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and no personal information of any kind will be made public. This research is meant for me to complete my MSc degree at Wageningen University only and will not be published.

I am very willing, however, to share the results with you and the forum.

³ Internet robots that search through TFF pages for the purpose of indexing in search engines such as google (Boellstroff 2008)

Therefore, considering the article presented below, I would like to hear how you envision farming after Brexit, good or bad, and without strong objection from the community, I will begin to study the exchange within this forum.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/aug/17/brexit-farming-reform-uk-agriculture-cap>

Thank you for your time

*Eliot Jones
(The Researcher)"*

I recorded and reflected on each response and, initially, allowed these to influence and shape my future methods. I logged into the site on a daily basis, using a laptop, but downloading and viewing the site through a sophisticated app for the latter two months. I began by recording and archiving threads from 'Brexit and Politics' subsection, starting with early topics that brought about the inception of this standalone group in February of 2016. This provided a sound explanation of how speculation and interest steadily grew as the referendum drew nearer.

Following this, I began to move through the 46 (March 2018) pages of separate discussion chronologically, following those with the highest traffic, finally arriving at present day. I then chose threads based on their political aptitude, which drew me away from the specific Brexit subsection to get a feel for the entire TFF community. This data can be based on a range of interpretations that can be better explained in the Theoretical Framework (1.4), however, at this point I attempted to remain dynamic in this respect. Rather than make explicit how I define "political", I let the data steer my process of analysis. This is recognized as the best process of sorting in netnography (Kozinets 2010). In the meantime, I took politics in its broadest form, using a free-handed approach to subjects which I deemed to be particularly provocative and of high tension; as Jackson (2013: 339) states *anything can be deemed political*.

Using this information, I looked deeper in order to gain a broader understanding, investigating comments, questions, feedback, project involvement and even leading further threads all intended to guide me to a sharper netnographic skillset (Kozinets 2010). After week 2, I began interviewing members, starting with those who responded to my introduction, moving on to those who peaked my interest on analysed threads, and finally employing a snowball sampling method and picking some at random. Of those I selected, perhaps 50 or more, 30 members were happy to engage in long conversations. Many of these were fruitful and enjoyable; all but two introduced themselves by their actual names, one member even gave his private phone number.

Interviews started with simple questions;

"How long have you been using TFF? What was your motivation for joining? Under what subsection do you spend most of your time commenting?"

We then moved onto more personal questioning based on individual profile alias, picture and status, exploring their unique take on the forum and the tools they used present themselves and engage. Finally, we discussed their position on Brexit, what they expect for the future of British agriculture and how they see the forum in relation to this. If conversation continued in

more depth, I would put questions on key points in relation to the EU, including, subsidies, environmental schemes and farm business tenancies. I refrained from an auto-netnographical approach, remaining as objective as possible in observing the creation of politics, rather than attempting to draw out *elicited* information (Kozinets 2010).

During this process I kept a field diary in which I recorded my daily observations, feelings, assumptions and experiences. This continued through both collection and analysis phases. This level of reflexivity has assisted my interpretation of meaning making and community creation (Svensson 2014).

I found various forms of data, both visual and textual, including debate, memes, gifs, external links, even font and background colour (Kozinets 2010). This information could be extrapolated in the form of screenshots, downloading word threads and a daily log.

I employed the use of Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) to logically sort data collected and make analysis easier at a later stage. I chose a programme named Atlas.ti, as it supports text of any kind of audio, video, or image, it is inexpensive for public download, it is compatible with Mac OS and is ready with the most powerful statistical tools available. Data is immediately recorded into the programme during collection. By choosing this path, I was careful to remain vigilant to store and backup all information, to keep theory in mind and to not fall into coding alone. This could have led to an overload of information and ideas whereas in netnographic research one must hold a focus on direction (Kozinets 2010). In order to prevent this, I used a specific and limited number of codes, first referencing a quote's relevance (subsidy, community, environment), then an additional code to each related to theory (otherness, identity, antipolitical) and finally a colour indication of groups of topics (pro-EU, anti-EU, History, Demographic). This provided a sound foundation for approaching TFF for an extended period of ethnographic research.

Previous research of this kind has found online communities to be rife with dissent rather than consensus building (Svensson 2013), a contentious environment where the true nature of *political* discourse is revealed (Swyngedouw, 2010). I have sought to achieve access to a much broader and more diverse population than might have been possible if I were to conduct interviews in-person, revealing opinions and positions explicitly and democratically, transcending and producing a range of unique biases and ethics (Svensson, 2013)(Gilchrist 2017).

Aside from many of the issues addressed above, such as transparency and permission, online actor identity is a contentious subject within netnographic study. Arguably, this can be perceived as a performance without the pressures of face-to-face interaction, a shielding of the "true-self" (Mooney 2015). Online pseudonyms will be treated with the same reverence and anonymity as if they were real names (Kozinets 2010). In this study, however, due to its political nature, I am able to use this to my advantage, as under such circumstances actors are more likely to reveal their politics (Strauss 2012). Furthermore, I am interested in how this is received and disseminated among the community rather than the source alone, so the legitimacy and "trustworthy" nature of shared information is not to be overemphasised (Mooney 2015).

Language is key in such discussions. One who intends to analyse online communities must be prepared to become immersed in the target population and have good prior understanding of their communication. There is a strong risk of misunderstanding and decontextualizing dialogue without any familiar prompts such as body language (Mooney, 2015). Kozinets (2010) goes as far to mention that evidence should be preserved regardless of its poor grammar and lack of punctuation. Having worked in this field for over 6 years and having

completed an agricultural degree, I consider myself to be fairly well versed in contemporary problems, politics and language.

I have proceeded to present this data in the following pages in its original form. All use of language remains intact, complete with spelling mistakes, both intentional and not (Kozinets, 2010). The only changes have been made to aliases, which I have altered to the best of my ability, attempting to capture their original sentiment.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Previous studies that have extensively explored political fora through a netnographical methodology are limited in number. A reputable framework of analysis is, therefore, yet to emerge. An innovator in this field, as frequently mentioned in previous sections, is Jakob Svensson. He specialises in studying online LGBT⁴ communities and how they conduct politics. He draws from issues of participation and motivation in creation of political antagonism in spaces not specifically designated for this purpose. In his 2014 study, he builds on Goffman's *Participation Framing*; 'the situational process of meaning making' (Svensson, 2014: 170), drawing political action out of ideological context in order to analyse specific encounters. In this way, Svensson is able to study multiple examples of political action and delineate what 'mobilized and maintained' participation. While many of his findings draw similarities with this study, in relation to inter-member hostility, Svensson differs in two fundamental analytical modes. First, he makes no reference to policy; Svensson does not specify any of the numerous antagonisms related LGBT. His focus is on the motivation for the politics, regardless of content. Crucial to this project, by contrast, is the influence and manifestation of the pro Brexit movement within TFF. Second, his choice of framing theory does not satisfy questions of dissemination of politics within online spaces; while he does explicitly address cultural influences, there is no means to review the affective repercussions of said political encounter under scrutiny. Thus, Svensson's study, while being a strong inspiration and a methodological parallel, does not provide a framework for this thesis.

An earlier study of his which bears even greater similarities to findings regarding identity creation and connectedness in online networks (Svensson, 2012), is an extremely fruitful resource for theoretical grounding but, again, there are few transferable tools for analysis.

Other noteworthy influences include Gilchrist & Ravenscroft's (2011) study of online canoeing politics and Jackson, Scullion, & Molesworth's (2013) comparison of politics in three non-political online fora. Each of these were invaluable for reflection, but no basis for analysis could be found. The consistent flaw came in the undergirding theme of this study; **what constitutes politics in TFF?**

In order to approach this question, I have had to devise a specific framework to suitably reflect my aforementioned methodological choice, research questions, population and setting. Whilst I am keen to remain dynamic, I must make some distinction as to how I intend to conceptualise what can and what cannot be considered political. Therefore, I loosely followed Chantal Mouffe's (1995) differentiation between *politics*, 'the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a sense of social order and organization', and the *political*, 'the antagonistic dimension that is inherent in human societies and which is located within the

⁴ Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual

struggles of diverse social groups for power and resources' (Mouffe, 1993). This establishes an understanding of how the debate within the forum can manifest itself; whether debate leads to coalition building or to contentious difference.

Providing my research answers lean toward one conclusion or the other, I may then employ *Polity Approach* which illustrates the trajectory of actors, their standing in the community and the impact this has on further discussion; how the political shapes politics (Hickey 2006). To consider TFF as part of a polity means I must analyse the community within a wider political entity, in this instance the UK with a backdrop provided by the EU, as it is the larger organisational body under inquiry. My investigation tackles how the TFF acts as a social and political collective within the hierarchy of UK and EU governance.

Furthermore, this framework provides a basis for my final SRQ, assessing how and to what extent TFF can feasibly influence the future of agricultural governance. This choice of analytical tool has been made based on its reputation for empowerment. It is well suited to this study in particular due to its inclusion of relation between actor and state, state distribution and control of resources, coalescence of groups against the control and, finally, 'the sequenced episodes of mutual engagement or iterative struggles that, in turn, influence later ones' (Hickey, 2006:12). Each of these components articulate well the political nature of the farmer relationship with Brexit. By recognising the agency in these actors, it is a tool for measuring the capabilities they have within their own, inherently political, environment (Hickey, 2006).

The post-truth era has opened a wide and provocative area for political study. While the internet has certainly been political since its inception, this is a more recent and novel phenomenon within digital networks and has really come to the fore in the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit debate. The internet has grasped public attention as an influence in politics in the form of fierce and violent populism. According to Majewski (2015), online tools for political discussion were intended to make democracy more effective and efficient; seemingly, however, they have created an extremely volatile situation in Anglo-American legislature, carrying two very unexpected democratic victories on the back of anti-immigration and anti-global sentiment.

This form of right-wing populism has been broadly researched by reference to traditional media (Newspaper, Television), but less so as to how it is presented and, more specifically, practiced through the internet and online fora (Andrejevic, 2013; Jenkins, 2007; Krämer, 2017). Populism, according to Krämer (2017: 1296), is an ideology that 'emphasizes the distinction between a monolithic elite and the people and between different ethnicities, cultures or nations, instead of functional differentiation and social inequality'.

Online, right wing populism is top-down, asymmetrical, despite the possible reciprocity in social networking technologies. As such, it is wholly undemocratic, defined by the whim of macho demagogues in the form of Nigel Farage (United Kingdom Independence Party) and Donald Trump among others. Approval is confirmed by 'likes' and 'shares', manifesting even greater reach and popularity, which is rarely met with debate. Right wing personalities 'invite whole populations to express their **identification** with the movement by simple, formalised technical means without regard to further differentiations and diverging interests in the population' (Krämer, 2017: 129). The result is a form of union and participation without contribution; the actor who indulges in these online movements is enthralled within them, made to feel at one with the crusade, using the online agency to further publicize the cause but making little to no impact upon actual policies.

Henry Jenkins argues that this development of populism, from broadcasting to participatory, is bringing politics closer to 'the community' (2006: 208). It takes issues typical of populist politics that are very close to the heart of offline communities and projects them online,

in the process of which, inadvertently creating new populist online communities. Those social media participants proceed to 'like' and 'share' right wing posts, thus becoming algorithmically connected to like-minded fellows. The true danger of this evolution in politics is revealed by its sheer velocity.

In his book 'Infoglut', Mark Andrejevic (2013: 250) highlights the dystopian qualities of a population with unlimited access to free media and news information in the age of the internet. He argues that the immensity of online data absorbs the observers' ability to critically adjudicate information. The social media activist is then vulnerable to information overload, the obfuscation of political narrative, the loss of clear decision making to emotion. This is the climate in which the term 'post-truth' has emerged and the need for political participation to influence a populist campaign has become superfluous; politics is subordinate to a demagogue's political argumentation.

This internet epoch is thus a breeding ground for populism; where political action is determined by punchy headlines and a simple click of the mouse rather than well planned reasoning. While populism and media sectionalisation are certainly not new influences to the political, as Jenkins (2007) suggests, the internet oversteps distance and time to bring these elements closer to those they wish to compel. Through this framework, we should seek to understand if and how these incidents come to light within the British farming community, whether this was a driving force in the vote to Leave and, if so, to further understand how this could influence the farmers to such a degree that they would vote against the CAP? – In the ensuing analysis I will employ this literature in combination with data gathered from TFF to determine its relevance and elucidate upon my posed research questions.

1.5 Aims of Thesis

The next four chapters present my findings in the style of ethnographic study; using evidence extrapolated from TFF in order to answer my SRQs chapter by chapter. Quotes are accompanied by an endnote which lists dates of posting and retrieval from the site. Each section builds toward a final argument regarding my analysis of Brexit in TFF. This is followed by conclusions and future recommendations.

In Chapter 2 I discuss how TFF is a seemingly a strong and stable online **community**. I explain how the British agriculturalists founded an online free space for political expression and exchange, with reference to broader farming culture. Whenever content strays into the **political**, however, a fiercely sceptical and competitive side is revealed. Rather than a **socially cohesive** community, based on openness and difference, this website is connected by a shared perception of a common **identity**. This illusive and controversial status is dominated and controlled by its most prolific members. TFF, therefore, is a profound and significant population politically, which entered the Brexit referendum with a violent and unsavoury attitude to engagement.

Following in Chapter 3, I will describe how the aforementioned community has conducted politics in the lead up to and following the Brexit debate. I will draw some conclusions as to why they engage in this way and what function this serves to their cause. The TFF community has fostered a form of political discourse defined and ushered forward by exchange of *Affect*. TFF is saturated by endless antagonistic debate over truth; emotion prevails as the defining political motif and violence emerges as the general mode of engagement. The result is a dualistic Remain/Leave contest which uses identity to suffocate debate.

In Chapter 4, I note a further position which absolves and inextricably exists around this dualism – uncertainty and disbelief. This scepticism stretches to the political process itself, reducing such issues to their economic value. The **market** becomes a safety-net for political ‘play’; the salience of political issues is lost when reduced of their contextual complexity to economic ‘fact’. The result is an affective free-for-all; a volatile political environment where notions with little rational basis may spear head extremely successful, emotionally charged campaigns. This form of politics, widely known as **populism**, I explore through the conception of sovereignty in TFF. The quest for greater freedom, ostensibly to be found in the ‘free’ market, can be perceived as an attempt to grasp and affirm identity. The notion of Sovereignty and its attraction for TFF members appears to be a cry for control of all that is ‘British Farmer’. This conception, however, is undermined by the insular form of political action employed by core members to express dominance and retain their position within the social hierarchy. Hence, the current political movement within TFF is captivated by this insatiable goal, incapable of forming a coherent force, left bitterly divided and violent.

Finally, I attempt to make some methodological reflections, considering the broader scope of this study. Drawing from desires and assumptions discovered within the forum, I proffer some conclusions as to how to establish a post-Brexit agricultural policy. Considering the findings of previous Chapters, I make suggestions to remedy the failings of TFF in this regard and provide recommendations for future research in this field. This research can only theorise based on interviews and threads. I have no hard evidence on how certain members voted in the final referendum. I can, however, hypothesise on how the result was achieved through sentiment analysis and reflection on the state of online politics.

CHAPTER 2: FARMERS IN COMMON

How has thefarmingforum.co.uk developed over time in relation to agricultural governance reform?

The following sections will provide a history of TFF, gathered from participant observation and planned interviews with active members and administrators of the site. It will describe in detail how the TFF has emerged as the leading platform for British agricultural social media users, how it is essentially a political group and why it is an interesting field for studying the [British farming] online community. This uses the definition of a political group as “any social connection shared by individuals, which can enable political discussion and interaction” (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012). I will use this in combination with the aforementioned definition of “political” by Chantal Mouffe; the “antagonistic dimension” of TFF (Mouffe, 1993). Finally, following Jenny Preece, I reference an online community as simply “a group in which individuals come together around a shared purpose, interest, or goal on the internet” (Preece, 2000).

At this juncture, I do not seek to analyse the EU-UK referendum and its proceeding consequences as such, but rather to draw conclusions as to how the site and its users have developed into this community. The trajectory of TFF popularity began long before Brexit and the core membership experienced little migration after the result was received. In this chapter, I would like to argue that TFF is, to paraphrase Theresa May, Prime Minister of Great Britain, a “strong and stable” community, despite and exceeding Brexit.

This community is unified and divided by an unorthodox form of social cohesion and identity; whenever discussion within the forum turns political, the definition of what constitutes TFF membership becomes highly contested (Weedon, 2011). There is a perversion of connectedness; while committed to the collective, individual members are fiercely competitive, coming together and maintaining that connection through violent conflict. I use the term violence, not in its strictly physical form, but as an act of exerting force or power through the social medium of language. Following Pierce (2001), this conception serves not only to justify other more serious acts of violence, for example political action, but also subverts the traditional idea that violence is strictly anti-social. In the case of TFF a form of ‘bonding through hostility’ emerges; actors on either side of a confrontation coming together with the desired outcome of best exemplifying an idealised identity. I will attempt to conceive this with observation of older archived threads, accounts from long term members and sentiment analysis of exchange within the community. This provides a solid justification as to how the TFF is engaged politically and why it is then susceptible to the exchange of affect and forms of populism that will be discussed in the following chapters.

2.1 TFF: A Short History

The first incarnation of a popular online forum aimed at British agriculturalists was as part of the Farmers Weekly Interactive [FWi], a national British magazine which provides “farming and agricultural industry news, pictures, videos, blogs and forums” (Fwi.co.uk, 2018). According to TFF members, FWi forum popularity peaked “*between 10 and 15 years ago*” (2002 – 2007). The FWi “forum community”, as it is known online, still exists as an archive, however, to view the most recent post, dated August 30th 2016, the key administrator disdainfully reports the following:

“Just wanted to let everyone know about the future of these forums. We’ve been very conscious for a while that there’s been less of an appetite among readers to use the Farmers Weekly forums. Many people now prefer platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, and there are alternatives forums available. As a result, we’ve decided, after a lot of thought, to close the Farmers Weekly forums to further comments. I’ve been involved with them for a few years, have met many interesting and lovely people and learnt a huge amount here, so it’s not without sadness that we’ve taken this decision. But feedback from readers consistently tells us that first and foremost it’s our other services and products that readers want Farmers Weekly to concentrate on. We’re planning to close the forums to new comments tomorrow (31 August) and at a later stage they’ll be taken offline altogether. The FWi photo galleries will be unaffected by this and will still be available for readers to use as always...”ⁱ

Evidently, the FWi was once a rich and thriving platform. The administrator espouses two key qualities of this community; knowledge and relationships. From this we may derive that FWi was a platform which facilitated exchange of unique information that carried the benefit of person to person contact. Through that exchange, bonds were made between participants that reached beyond the realm of ‘online’ to create real emotional connections between its members. Users did not simply collide in cyber space, they ‘met’, befriended one another and freely shared information to those who outside of this arena would be their rivals. This has diminished to such an extent, however, that the administrators have decided to end all new activity.

This departure can be attributed to a number of factors according to TFF interviewees. Difficulties with “logging in” and other technical deficiencies suggest that FWi was lagging in an era of much web design progress, and a more sophisticated, younger sibling was waiting in the wings; the British Farming Forum (BFF). Material limitations put the shift in motion whilst a far more controversial sentiment propelled it forwards:

“it was highly moderated, couldn't say NFU = No Fudging Use or anything like expressing an opinion. Hopeless so we all gradually moved to BFF”ⁱⁱ

Interview 18, French Labourer

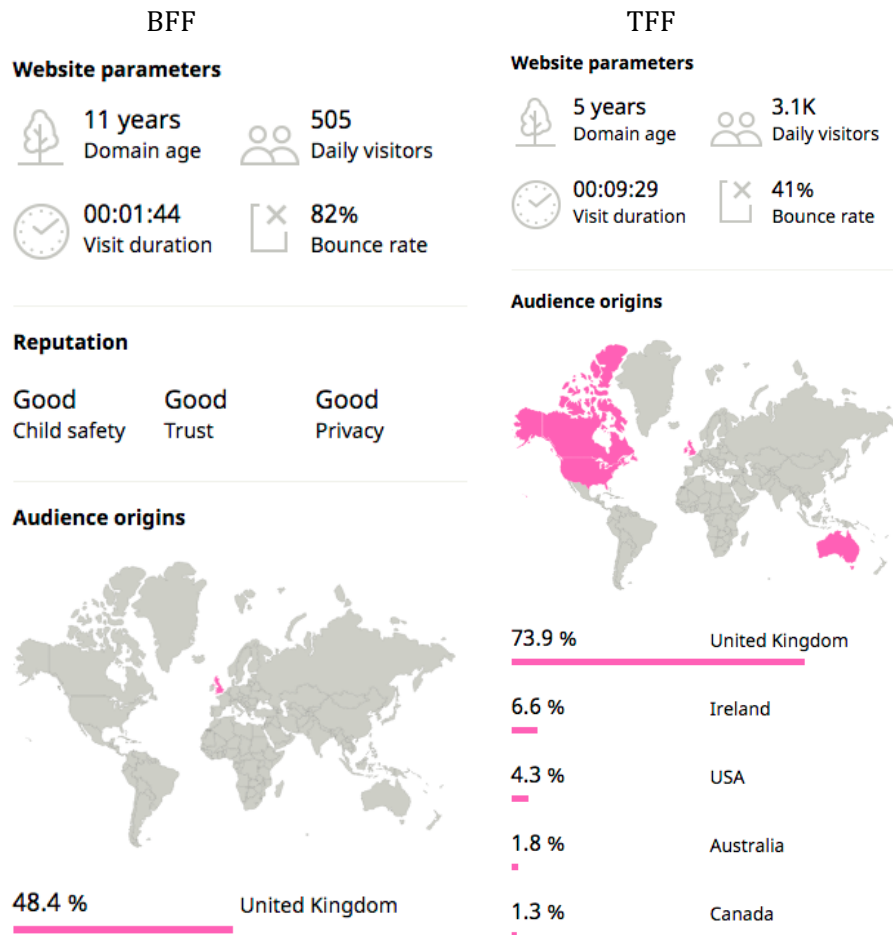
“There were lots of reasons the FWi forum failed... Managing shouty know-it-all posters is tricky. Whilst overmoderation creates the feeling of lack of freedom of expression, people who get shouted down by a few loud voices just tune out”ⁱⁱⁱ

*Interview 19, Dors't
(Abbreviation of Dorset, province in the UK)*

The FWi, being a privately-owned company with ambitions and sponsors outside of the interest of forum participants, could not afford to facilitate the controversy and dissension necessary to maintain a ‘farmer’s forum’. The first of the two quotes above, whilst not actually displaying a profanity, ridicules the NFU, the acronym for the National Farmers Union, the largest and most powerful governmental agricultural institution and lobby group in the UK. The FWi could not be seen to advocate belittling of this organisation and resided to harsh censorship. The second quote indicates how this curtailing of internet freedom cultivated a sense of resentment and pushed

members onto the BFF. It shows how the “loud voices” learnt to contain themselves; that through the failing forum, the community managed to develop interpersonal boundaries to discussion that would allow their platform to remain unabated.

Figure 1 Performance Statistics



Nevertheless, the BFF would experience a similar fate. This platform remained popular until the TFF was created in 2013. BFF is still very much in use, but the traffic is significantly lower; 501 daily visitors in comparison to TFF’s 3100 (Figure 1). Again, there were issues with moderation and, eventually, cataclysmic technical issues:

*“The BFF did not change with its contributors needs and **John** launched his forum whilst they had a disastrous outrage due to technical problems.”*

Interview 16, Mythical Antelope^{iv}

“There were a lot of us on there for several years previously, including the founders of TFF, who all migrated as a community.”

Interview 25, TomO^v

*"2012... it crashed. I didn't want to start again in what was an over moderated forum with every previous post lost, so I moved to TFF and haven't been back....BFF was hacked or had a major crash, deleting all users & posts. **John & Tired** started up TFF a few days later. The rest is history..."*

Interview 19, Dors't^{vi}

"We all gradually "landed" here."

Interview 18, French Labourer^{vii}

"The old BFF had a few technical problems as well as a fierce entry policy, so when TFF came along there was much rejoicing in Happy Valley."

Interview 20, UFO^{viii}

The period 2007 – 2013 experienced even greater leaps in internet technology. BFF administrators, according to quote one, could not meet the demands of the network to improve. The BFF was similarly moderated, the *Off-Topic* section was shutdown (where the Brexit & Politics section is located on TFF) because of personal attacks and inappropriate language which *"took the sole (soul) out of the place"*. Multiple interviewees even mentioned threats of legal action between companies and posters. Although no one was held legally responsible, this led to more severe censorship. The BFF seems to have been functioning much like FWI, limiting the arena within which the community needed to thrive. As seen in quote two, the community had been growing within BFF, bonds had been made that would outlive the platform, and protagonists had been forged that would be ready to architect the next arena when catastrophe ensued. They would then be able to create a forum owned by members, for members; a safe haven for the entirety of the community to gain its independence.

Quote three displays the reluctance of members to continue using BFF. With all content deleted in the crash, the community had lost its history. To rebuild its founding discussion boards and threads, streams of information going back over five years would have been a monumental task on a platform that would probably, in the future, once again, limit its growth. Furthermore, there was a distinct lack of trust in the reliability of the site going forward. Members were enraged and for many, the connection with the space was lost.

The BFF was offline for over a week and, during its absence, two members launched TFF. The fourth and fifth quotes suggest how members were floating in cyber space without purpose, frustrated and angry, and were *rejoicing in Happy Valley* when *landing* once again in a free space. TFF became a new, celebrated home in which administrators participated in discussion alongside members. This new egalitarian platform allowed interactive feedback and continued reflexivity between members and administrators, each of whom had a common interest; to keep TFF and the community alive. This gave a shared sense of ownership to the new space, which has allowed the community to mature into the established and diverse group it is today.

There are now subsections in marginal, unorthodox areas such as "Holistic Agriculture", subjects that steer broadly away from the common vision of British farming. There are sections for dating, for lonely farmers and those for just friends. There is even a space to discuss medical issues, in confidence, with respect and due care of others.

"I bought a landrover in the 90s from Retired Agrarian and my wife worked for TomO's dad . JackD comes out here and has visited twice."

Interview 18, French Labourer^{ix}

*“My dad was on here so put me onto it and then I just liked being party of a community really.....
Yep I have met quite a few members since being on here. A few of which I would consider myself to
actively be friends with. It's really a brilliant place to be here.....I use it for everything from
entertainment to advise to mental Help to a degree(not that I'm mental) but some days when your
feeling a bit blue there are people here for you”*

Interview 11, Legless Sheep^x

“That is what TFF is for: Somebody to share our problems and successes with, isn't it?”

Thread on Protectionism, Stripy^{xi}

The first quote above evidences the bonds made through the forum, transcending the digital space into actual world relations and experiences. TFF has a powerful impact on the livelihood of participants through trade, career options and simply friendly visits. The network has an enormous potential to bring together those who would not meet outside of TFF.

The second quote addresses this in reverse, that family members encourage each other to join and share a digital life within the forum together – I even interviewed a husband and wife who enjoyed maintaining an open and joint relationship online, insisting that they both participate in the same interview. Furthermore, this demonstrates how relationships are created without having to leave the purely digital world. In a profession that demands long working hours and, consequently, a limited window for social interaction, the forum presents a space for sharing and growth, especially among young people. This is exemplified by the end of quote 2 and 3; TFF has fostered a shared sense of belonging and trust, a community of like-minded peers within which individuals might engage and support one another. It is clear that even solely within TFF, the bonds created can have a broad and rewarding impact on the lives of participants.

Now in its fifth year of operation, the full lifecycle of its predecessors, TFF's success looks to continue. As a result, founder **John** claims:

*“The site now serves about 150 million pages a year, has 250,000 unique visitors each month and
28,000 members, over 2.5million posts in the 4 years we have been around, 81% of traffic is UK, its
about 50/50 livestock and arable traffic and 73% male...
of the 28k plus about 20k are what we call "active" ie have logged in to read or post within the last
28days”*

Interview 2, John^{xii}

While some members like to talk down these claims, that perhaps these numbers are misrepresented, made up by bots and one-time visitors, the sites success in comparison to its predecessors is undeniable.

*“John likes to talk things up I think, and is in the business of building this forum's commercial
value. For as long as it costs us nothing, we aren't plagued by adverts, and we all enjoy this online
space, then good luck to him. If he fails to maintain any of those, he might find folk drifting off
elsewhere. Without active members, there is no forum ultimately.”*

Interview 25, TomO^{xiii}

I found little discontent within TFF in it's current forum. Apart from one message reminding posters to “to calm down a bit, let's keep a check on the personal insults please” atop the Brexit subsection, I witnessed little to no administrator interference. Considering the quote above, members are aware of this relationship. It seems that although there is some self-scepticism in

relation to the forum's success, ultimately it is the cohesive nature of the community which maintains the website.

This short history of TFF and its previous incarnations is significant for two reasons. First, the forum necessitates a space for relative freedom of expression. In order to function, the administrators must allow that members express themselves politically. Following the definition of Mouffe (1995), it is this antagonistic dimension, as shown by the "NFU=No Fudging Use" quote, the suggestion of legal threats between members and the drowning out of 'shouting voices', that must be allowed to succeed in order to preserve the 'soul' of TFF. The political nature is not necessarily a force for change, but the forum must be a place where members can "let off a bit of steam...". While clearly there have been other factors, frustration due to restraint seems to have been the driving force for departure and the death knell of previous fora. In addition, forum members are aware of their participative nature in the forum, that their support is integral to the maintenance of the site and that, if they so wish, they have the power to shift its path. Therefore, political expression and participation are fundamental to the existence of TFF.

"So, I've been using Farming Forums since the British Farming Forum / FWi so long that I don't remember which was first."

Interview 18, French Labourer^{xiv}

"There was no agreed upon action, everyone made their own mind up."

Interview 22, UFO^{xv}

Second, there is a solid, tight knit community of members who have participated in discussions, some for as long as 15 years. Their fluid movement from one platform to another, as seen in the quotes above, suggests that it is not the arena but the community which is most important. The use of "us" and "we" shows that they self-identify as a collective. There certainly seems to be an undergirding wish to remain a whole.

TFF is, therefore, certainly an interesting and novel sample for study in the new era of online politics. Whilst there may be a multitude of uses for the forum in general (knowledge sharing, business, banter, moaning...), this case makes a strong argument that the community itself is inextricably linked to its own freedom of expression. Politics is both a force of concern from within TFF and without, an integral character of its existence and a powerful pillar of the agricultural community at large. This phenomenon, then, takes a strange and contradictory shape in terms of political discussion.

2.2 Cultivating Online Community

The online community of TFF is evidently formed around a shared interest in agriculture. The general foci of messaging concerns farming within the UK. As can be seen from previous quotes, British members account for up to 81% of traffic. I came across non-UK members using the forum for prospective business, others who had moved abroad and were keeping in contact with friends, and yet more who operate in an area with a similar climate or with other strong links to UK agriculture. The forum is, of course, primarily aimed at British farmers but this alternative offshore group is generally, not a problem. Often regarded as a conservative group, their element of diversity is welcomed in the TFF and the mixture of knowledge considered an asset:

"Yes, on an island in the baltic, right between finland and sweden. So i'm Swedish speaking."

Interview 12, Noah^{xvi}

"No southern farming forums that I know of, facebook pages yes, but they lack the ferocity and debate of a forum structure. Although much of it has zero relevance I'm definitely an addict of TFF."

Interview 22, New Zealand Sam and Agriculturalist Jim^{xvii}

"I doubt many of the UK TFF members would really stand being hours from the nearest town in Australia or Africa or Russia or Canada even if they had good communication with the outside world...Perhaps New Zealand Sam and Agriculturalist Jim (Australia) would have interesting views over sovereignty and agoraphobia/claustrophobia."

Interview 19, Dors't^{xviii}

"I use my real photo and am open about my situation and volunteer information when asked, which is that I am an immigrant, a single mother, relatively well-off, planning to become a "lifestyle" farmer and work in the City at the moment - which probably should, combined, put me in the most hated 0.1% of the population. However, my experience here, apart from one or two isolated instances, was very positive and so far I must say that there are a lot of stereotypes that did not turn out true."

Interview 10, Artichoke Mind^{xix}

Noah, in the first quote, is a Finnish farmer, residing on an island in the Baltic Sea. The climate there is similar to the UK and he grows vegetables that are common on British farms, so that the forum is of use as a knowledge resource and also for entertainment. Although rarely contributing to threads, and so perhaps not a well invested member, Noah is comfortable within the forum, maintains a profile with personal details and is happy to identify himself. Our conversation took place over 6 weeks as he regularly logged in and we pursued an enjoyable and fruitful conversation.

I spoke with an Australian and a New Zealander together; they had both been members for many years and, whilst they claim not to have gained much practical farming information from the site, they took much pleasure in promoting and debating their own approach to agricultural practices. In this regard they are often engaged willingly and add value with their perspective and sense of fair play in "ferocious debate", as seen in quote 4 from Dors't. This is evident despite their clear position outside of 'the norm'; using their nationalities in their online aliases emphasises their minority status.

The final quote above is from Artichoke Mind, a non-British born female member, performing research on TFF in order to pursue a career as a lifestyle farmer in the UK. As an Eastern European, she worries about her reception in post-Brexit rural Britain. She is very pleased, however, with her reception in the TFF. A single female Eastern European might be concerned that she would be reviled by the British farming community but, within the confines of TFF, she reports as being comfortable and happy.

TFF, therefore, is a socially cohesive community. According to Weedon (2011), social cohesion is built on openness to difference, engagement of minorities and fostering of diversity. Given the evidence above, it is fair to suggest that TFF is a welcoming and receptive place for the outsider. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse the true nature of how race and gender are perceived in online spaces, given the openness these members give to their 'otherness', TFF as a community seems accessible to strangers.

It is perhaps not this level of cohesive acceptance that has allowed the community to flourish, however, but rather a shared identity and desire to fulfil it that has forced the political development seen in the previous section. This cohesion becomes highly volatile whenever discussion enters the political or, more specifically, subjects explicitly concerning "the struggle... for power and resources" (Mouffe, 1993). **Going by the short history of TFF, I argue that it is not heterogeneity and open-mindedness that has ensured its survival, but the insatiable pursuit of identity through political hostility and struggle.**

Before delving into this discrepancy, one should first establish the significance and embeddedness of said identity. According to Leve (2011), identity is a 'powerful organising presence', it is what allows us to be 'socially recognizable'. It is a 'reflexive construct or experiential modality through which one knows oneself' (Leve, 2011). It 'is never one thing, it is both contextual and complex' (Weedon, 2011). Identity, it seems then, is fluid and subjective, just beyond the reach of substantiation. It is a tool with which human actors address one another's and one's own relevance to a given community. Hirvonen & Pennanen (2018: 3) claim it is the recognition of said identity that 'holds the key to determining what is just in a society and what a good society is... society as a whole can be seen as a system of recognition'. Thus, identity is not only a unifying force, it is also the basis for creating a shared morality and sense of judgement. It is this which comes under much scrutiny in the political realm of TFF as, ultimately, it lacks a conclusive definition. Therefore, whilst there are many ways to perform identity within TFF, ranging from the study of behaviour to a profile picture, I conceive each of these as a futile move to characterize that which is liquid and ambiguous.

As a minority group within the UK and often somewhat geographically isolated, identity is very important to those in the farming community. Following Burton & Wilson (2006), whilst identity can be very broad and certain actors can fulfil multiple roles, the idealised notion of 'British Farmer' within the UK is a very powerful and absolving force. Their study found that those actors even with the most peripheral connection to farming maintained this identity with great conviction. The Othering of those that are 'not-farmer' has forged a tight and desirable status, as is evident in the struggle that resulted in the creation of TFF; rejecting the interests of those not within the community itself to be governed by one's peers.

A cross-section of identity in TFF sheds light upon both the socialisation of the community and its political function. The British farmer performance is evident in many social interactions with TFF but is most clearly and easily explained in language. English is the only *real* language spoken within the forum. Some members will use French words or expressions but only ironically or to underline a point, as seen in the first quote below. More significantly, some will

type communicatively in what can only be described as “farmer”; an attempt to phonetically spell a stereotypical west-country farmer’s accent.

“Or perhaps some more Brexit minded French would be (apologies for spelling) “Meme si le bateau coule, it faut continuer a rammer [Even if the boat sinks, we must continue to row].”

Interview 8, Stationary^{xx}

*“ows me sbellin ? buggerdify wana let thee foarm down wi bad sbellin”
[How is my spelling? I will be buggered ⁵if I let the farm down with my bad spelling]*

Alias status, Jones^{xxi}

“I think there’s a TFF member who calls himself ‘Git Orf My Land’ [Get Off My Land] which, to me, epitomises this attitude.”

Interview 9, DennisL^{xxii}

The use of language is extremely significant. In the first quote, Jones is humorously attempting to perceive and imitate the ignorance that is generally attributed to the common farmer. ‘Outsiders’ will often purvey the farming community as lesser educated and backward; Jones, however, uses this sentence as a status to his alias. It accompanies every post that he makes, for all other members to see. Although clearly in jest, Jones is using this to represent himself. Beside this he only has his alias, in this case simply his surname, and a profile picture, which is a picture of a cow lying down. This sentence is his most provocative indicator for identity in TFF, and it is one that all others will immediately recognise as characteristic of “British Farmer”.

The third quote describes a member’s alias “Git Orf My Land”, an expression often used by the non-farming community to parody the aggression of farmers to the non-farming community. It uses the same phonetic spelling but this time with a more powerful sentiment. The initial assertion “Git orf” or “Get Off”, is the rejection of the ‘Other’, the expulsion of those not within the given community. “My Land” emphasises the territorial nature and ownership farmers feel as part of their identity with the land, or in the case of TFF, their free political space. In the given quote, DennisL uses this as an example to stress this identity; by using this alias, this member enters every interaction head on with ‘I am “British farmer”, and I will not waver’ (interestingly the alias is the only feature on TFF that cannot be changed).

This manipulation of speech is common in TFF. Members use terms like ‘Tony B-liar’, referring to ex-British Prime Minister Tony Blair, parodied in the UK for his supposed dishonesty in relation to the Iraq war. Other common terms are ‘Re-moaners’ to describe those who voted to remain in the EU and continue to press for that, and the aforementioned ‘NFU’. Use of abbreviations and colourful linguistic expression is akin to other online domains, producing controversy as these words enter official language and recognised by dictionaries (Houghton, 2018). Impersonating the regional accents of farmers in dialogue is the TFF equivalent of ‘LOL’; it is a foundation to performing an identity through creative assembly, separate from other platforms and becomes a powerful indicator as to how actors perceive and recreate information (Darvin, 2015). It seems that members, throughout the forum, are using language to embody the ‘British Farmer’ identity. There are more intricate examples of farmer identity expression embodied through other forms of media within TFF, but the examples given above suffice to

⁵ Buggered: Profanity referring to male homosexual intercourse

purvey the pinnacle of this, literally to 'spell it out', with the added bonus of expressing a profound political sentiment.

By this measure, TFF is perhaps a platform for people to pursue and enact a powerful identity, and that this is the main driver for **community**. As previously mentioned in my methodology, online platforms are often regarded as a pretence for 'actual' identity outside of this space. Previous research has widely respected this despite the obvious biases of online actors fabricating their identities to suit their own self impression (Boellstorff, 2015). It is, therefore, a known phenomenon that online community members will recreate a virtual personality based on a desired, romanticised performance of their self, even when they claim transparency (Boellstorff, 2015). Svensson (2012) critically recognises that due to the lack of physical and bodily interaction within online mediated spaces, the process of creating this identity is a fundamental act of socialisation. To address one's own place within the network, it is essential to create (truthful or not) an online persona, with interests, groups, follows and likes. These attributes make up and express self-hood, distinguishing one individual from another, while simultaneously bringing them together, finding commonality within interests, groups, follows and likes (Svensson, 2012). Therefore, **the pursuit for identity and community creation are very closely linked within online networks, if not inextricable one from another.**

Upon reflection, and with reference to many of my interviewees, the inner circle of Brexit posters seems not actually to be what one might describe as active British farmers, rather retirees, expats, farmers' sons and prospective farmers, fulfilling an identity through the forum that might be unattainable to them outside of this digital space. As seen in figure one and mentioned above, there is a small percentage of members from outside the UK, yet even these seem to have a desire to be what they are not:

"I am / was an anglophile who spent 3 years working on UK farms yrs ago, am on a north American farming forum but it is all dick waving & who has the biggest tractor & high inputs & chemicals & fertilizer & rednecks & guns & pro trump & hating Moslems . . ."

Interview 22, New Zealand Sam and Agriculturalist Jim^{xxiii}

"I wanted to check it for myself in a relatively safe environment such as an internet forum - before I jump and invest a significant amount, only to find a crowd of angry farmers with pitchforks on my doorstep the next morning"

Interview 10, Artichoke Mind^{xxiv}

New Zealand Sam, who earlier described himself as a TFF addict, is a self-confessed anglophile with a distaste for American crudeness. He acknowledges his love for British culture and in the same sentence, refutes his belonging to the 'agricultural Other'. He has spent three years working on UK farms and maintains his presence on TFF to keep that part of his identity alive. The second quote is from Artichoke Mind. As mentioned earlier, she is on the forum specifically in order to research the possibility of becoming a farmer in England. In the quote she expresses her fear of rejection from the community, even considering the possibility of physical violence. She reveals her commitment and the measures she is considering to fulfil this identity.

This desire to fulfil an identity through language is evident throughout participation in TFF in multiple performances and embodiments. The romanticised creation of an identity, however, becomes highly contested in contact with the broader collective. According to Burton, actual farmer identity is rooted in productivism; in a study in Bedfordshire, England, farmers were found to be judged within the community based on their gains and productivity (Burton &

Wilson, 2006). Taking the quote from Retired Agrarian below, his friend the contractor (a machine operator for hire) makes no money from farming as such (the sale of crops, livestock), yet is considered a very good farmer for all the money he extracts from the industry. The farmer identity is evidently somewhat confused, redefining the traditional perception of the land custodian, to something more financially determined (Gibbard & Ravenscroft, 1997). On the one hand this withdraws the identity away from its origins and its deep connection with land, but on the other, it provides leeway for those living on the edge of this rural sub-culture to claim relevance.

“A contractor I know would call himself a farmer but he actually receives all his income from a variety of sources none of which are actually selling a crop grown, but he is a farmer and a good one.”

Interview 21, Retired Agrarian^{xxv}

For the members that I have mentioned, the use of this digital space to fulfil identity can be problematic. Although they can easily hide behind the anonymity of online personality, this does not necessarily fulfil the desire to become that person and emphasises the difference between online and actual space. Furthermore, as has been made clear, it can be difficult to be sure how to best portray this identity. I was regularly told “I am not a “real” farmer”, “I do not have typical views” or “proper farmers will be along later”, when I started an interview or thread, as if none of the participants wanted to step out of the normative structure or put their own reputation as a forum member at risk by speaking against the others (Hirvonen & Pennanen, 2018). They would repetitively discredit themselves, perhaps because I was considered an outsider, so as not to damage the linguistic wedge between lived identity and political criticism that allows members to pursue an alternative to the actual-self. It seems to be the mode by which members are able to immerse themselves in the digital world. This disavowal, “I am not a farmer but, in this instance, I can pretend to be”, reveals much about the insecurity and incomprehensibility in this identity.

2.3 TFF Political Identity

In the previous two sections I have established that TFF participants are an established online community, connected through a shared identity. I will now discuss how this identity influences the political dimension of TFF, how an unruly and confrontational sentiment grew up which continued throughout the Brexit campaign. In analysing the “Brexit and Politics” subsection, it becomes clear that identity, whilst being a cohesive force, is also the main tool of adversity. What Hirvonen & Pennanen (2018) call mis or non-recognition (exclusion, disrespect, objectification) becomes a detrimental social evil.

Fundamental to the nature of TFF community is its informal hierarchy. It is widely acknowledged that, through the history of the site and its predecessors, there has always been a core membership that is most profoundly involved in debate.

“My casual understanding of TFF is that it is dominated by about fifty contributors who submit over half the thread traffic.”

Interview 5, NFU Rep^{xxvi}

This is evident both in the individual's active presence and a score board of posts, likes, messages and shares, that each core member parades, almost like medals. These members form what Jones & Rafaeli (1999) call a community of Social Loafers, one in which many view the posts of a few. The significance of this is that the fifty members referred to here, determine the majority of content that the other 27,000 active members view. These inner members have enormous potential to shape the discussion within the forum and influence those who simply read it. Politically this is a profoundly powerful population; the views expressed by these few posters have the network capacity to alter political discourse on a national electoral scale. By maintaining this dominant position there are two evident repercussions. First, as Jones & Rafaeli (1999) argue, this leads to information overload in observing members; the high level of traffic from the inner circle dissuades them from contributing as there is too much data to conceive without a large amount of invested time. Prospective posters see little value in their own contribution in comparison to the evident presence of the core. Hence, by maintaining their high input, core members maintain their higher status, asserting their power and reducing possible competitors to 'social loafers'.

Second, once in possession of that status, core members are able to manipulate what I have already shown to be a highly impressionable conception of identity to their political advantage;

"Farmers were farming for thousands of years without Monsanto's help. They only made roundup affordable to use on a field scale once the patent had run out, c 30 odd years ago. How is it possible "farmers" could be dependent on it? I would argue that those who are dependent are not what I would call "farmers"."

Thread on Glyphosate Vs Brexit, SpanishFriend^{xxvii}

"Poll should be divided into farmer and non farmer as I cannot believe there are so many turkeys voting for xmas [Remain – preservation of CAP] on principle."

Thread on IN or OUT, Quantum Leap^{xxviii}

In another exchange between two members:

PeterLucas: *"Muller, Freshways and now Meadow [cooperatives that dropped their milk purchase price] What we going to do about it, can't let this happen again."*

Rower: *"Quit"*

Thread on Milk Price Drop^{xxix}

The first of the quotes above is extracted from a significant thread (replies 50, views 838) in November of 2017, four months after the Brexit result. The discussion began on the subject of the decision to leave Europe, whether the right decision had been made and how the Brexit negotiations might be affected. The second response from Spanish Friend, with whom I spoke extensively and gaged to be a politically balanced member without extreme views, quashed the possibility of a political discussion before it could begin. He immediately invokes identity to be the defining political factor; he distracts the reader from the essential detail with a more provocative and enticing sentiment. The argument then dissolves into a 'shouting match' over the safety and science of Glyphosate, what is meant by free trade and, finally, what is a farmer:

“Life ain't all about a few farmers. I'm the only one who could be described a farmer in my direct family of 19 persons and I think more of their well being than my own. Even then. I'm happier to describe myself as a smallholder who does other stuff as well. Although. Being a BPS recipient for the while. I must be a farmer. But. As I don't use glyphosates..... I can't be.”

Thread on Glyphosate Vs Brexit, Troglodyte^{xxx}

The thread “*Glyphosate Vs Brexit*” begins with a subject that is inextricable from both Brexit and agriculture and critically concerns the access and control of a resource. Glyphosate is an herbicide, commonly known as Round-Up used ubiquitously on British and EU farms. At the time of writing (2018) the EU parliament is considering a continent-wide ban. There is hope within the forum that withdrawal may save the chemical in the Britain (European Commission, 2017). Spanish Friend’s assertion in this instance is very powerful; anyone who relies on Glyphosate as part of their practice, a legitimate concern for most if not all conventional farmers, cannot call themselves a farmer. The discussion cannot resile from this into rational conversation regarding use of the chemical for fear of contradicting the farmer identity. Furthermore, few of the other members have the confidence to challenge this assertion and risk being called upon to validate themselves. The thread ends with the statement from Troglodyte, not challenging Spanish Friend as such, but making aware the futility of this kind of hostility. In the same piece, however, he disavows the point for making the argument in the first place (‘Life ain’t about a few farmers’) discrediting further the initial political statement. This appears to have turned other participants off as the conversation ends.

The next quote, from Quantum Leap, expresses a similar sentiment. He considers that anyone who votes for a Brexit is effectively not a farmer. Any member who disagrees with his political stance is not a farmer, not a valid member of TFF and not worthy of posting. It is *anti-political*, a term used throughout this thesis synonymously with de-politicization to describe the act of removing an antagonistic element from debate, refusal to meet opposition and the devolution of inter-actor issues to higher, exterior and often imagined forces. In this instance, Quantum Leap insinuates that any proceeding opposition will threaten their validity as a member by commenting against him and, therefore, must agree to retain their identity. This comes across as perhaps the strongest and most damaging sentiment expressed within the forum, the castration of an actor’s purpose to engage, the annulment of their right to argue.

The final quotes regarding the drop in the milk price are the first and second statements from the given thread. Peter Lucas asserts that some political action against the repetitive crashing of the milk purchasing price below its cost of production is necessary. This fluctuation has devastated the dairy industry with consequent destruction of livelihoods since the removal of the Milk Marketing Board and production cap in 2005. Rower immediately responds with the abrupt “quit”. The sentiment is here being reduced to a simpler anti-political view; if what you are doing demands the political, you should not do it. This is antagonistic in the most basic of its definition and, therefore, political, but fruitless. Nothing can result of such hostility other than greater hostility, as can be seen in the forums history; TFF has not emerged as a platform for political change but rather self-destruction (FWi and BFF crash and legal threats) through the heinous sentiment it requires to feel free.

This intolerance of the political is broadly and openly professed in TFF against those perhaps considered more radical. Troll is a word frequently thrown around to describe and belittle those radically challenging the norm. Although clearly subjective, as one member told me with regard to Trolls “The difference between insanity and genius is defined by success”^{xxxi}, one

member, Cinderbush, repetitively and consistently provokes anti-political uproar with a disgusted reception:

Cinderbush: *“How do you guys sleep at night with so many enemies around you? Media, Brussels, Merkel, Corbyn, 28 odd million remoaners,”*

Multifaceted: *“.....That is not a valid reply to me....”*

Dragon: *“Well, at least you are on our side, we know that because you've told us, twice... . Back in the real world, where does the number 28 'odd' million come from?”*

Thread on Fascism^{xxxii}

Cinderbush here references the paranoia expressed within the forum; the consistent scapegoating and blaming of different institutions for a myriad of problems. He often does this, as here, in a slightly amused and light-hearted tone, but he makes a fundamental point about the behaviour of his fellow members, attempting to instil reflexive politics rather than disavowal and dissent. Other members totally disregard what he says however; he is known to be a ‘Troll’ and therefore can be ignored and subjected to shaming, here accused of living outside the ‘real’ world. Cinderbush’s motivation in fulfilling this role is complex and difficult to understand, but it has a significant impact on TFF politics. By being a humorous radical, Cinderbush makes political difference seem like a joke; he appears to seek to create an atmosphere where it is acceptable to silence those with an opposing view with no justification:

Bloggs93: *“Are you honestly suggesting that all paedophiles are Muslim?!! Please visit the sex offenders wing of your nearest prison, you will find all religions and nationalities. Ffs I'm not even defending Muslims, the only reason I commented on this thread was that another poster stated that the police were selective in who they prosecute which is nonsense. I have nothing but upmost respect for our police force.”*

Angry Midget: *“You're just a troll”*

Thread on Britain First^{xxxiii}

The initial post from Bloggs93 is an attempt to reason with the forum; having entered the discussion to try and defend the police against an obvious and hateful generalisation, he becomes subjected to the same ignorant sentiment. He is labelled “troll”. His identity is transformed from respected member to rogue, an erroneous force set to frivolously attack other members. Any further comments he makes will be debased and regarded as unworthy as, according to Angry Midget, his sentiment is not made from political motivation but simply to undermine the common cause of the forum.

It is clear that, while TFF is a community where the political can and does emerge, the deep insecurity of its members makes questionable the possibility of a true discussion. Rather than allow difference in politics, those ideals that represent the conservative, isolated, rural world of the British farmer are celebrated and flourish. Paradoxically, while in every other regard the site appears to be a socially cohesive community, when discussion becomes political, it becomes a competition of identity, cohesion melts away, and the forum becomes a breeding ground for hostility.

Herein lies the political disparity of TFF. The inner circle of members determines much of the content on the forum. In the Brexit subsection they do this by manipulating the definition

of 'British Farmer'. Although by no means agreed upon, the consistently transforming identity is moulded by the presence and prowess of those prolific members. In the example above, Bloggs93, who has only 202 messages and 387 likes, is silenced by Angry Midget it, who carries 2438 messages and 2062 likes. As Boellstorff (2015: 228) writes '[r]eputations and ratings have become extremely important in many virtual worlds, as on the internet more generally (eBay, Amazon), a state of affairs foreseen since the beginning of the internet.' In this instance, one's reputation, or as mentioned earlier, one's connectedness to the community through a popular identity through 'likes', stratifies membership in TFF.

Boellstorff continues; 'embedding one's self into (virtual) objects is the assumed means of turning labour into value' (Boellstorff, 2015: 209). He explicitly refers to increased online presence as a means of value creation. This is extended by Karatzogianni & Kuntsman (2012: 247-8) 'Spaces of digital media provide a sense of community and affection - a form of affective labour which is lacking in the offline working life of advanced capitalist societies'. Investment of time and effort to establish oneself within online spaces, fabricating a profile to suit an identity, is a means of becoming part of a community born of an emotive and optimized pursuit to belong. Once one becomes popular within such a community these invaluable tags of connection instil a powerful position.

In TFF, the more prolific posters use their influence to dominate arguments and, in so doing, silence political difference. Bloggs93 in this instance is a troll, he is the Other, not 'British Farmer' and not worthy of TFF debate. This sentiment is then disseminated throughout the community. The thread under discussion received at least 2104 views but only 96 replies. This sizable audience allows diffusion of this altercation to ripple through the community and slowly influence what is politically tolerated as "British Farmer".

To sum up, the political community of TFF was perfectly captured when Agriculturalist Jim told me in regards to Brit farmer members:

"Forget Brexit, the biggest malaise affect Brit farmers is - Brit farmers . . ."

Interview 22, New Zealand Sam and Agriculturalist Jim^{xxxiv}

Agriculturalist Jim explicitly acknowledges that the *political* incapacity of the community is not due to exterior *politics* (Mouffe, 1993); in this instance he is referencing Brexit, but the argument can be extended to the comment made by Cinderbush earlier; "*Media, Brussels, Merkel, Corbyn, 28 odd million remoaners*". It is not the institutions, politicians and voters that cause anger and disillusionment within TFF, rather it is the illusive 'Brit farmer' identity which is used to castrate itself politically. The issues at hand seem to have little relevance to the discussion, taking for example the variety of threads mentioned in this short chapter; fascism, protectionism, political parties, legality, science. The result is a rejection of said political subject and a referral to the dominant ideals of the 'British farmer'. These ideals, controlled by the inner circle of members, are fervently problematic and fuel **violent hostility and popular revulsion**, as will become clear later in this thesis.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

To close Chapter 2 and summarise the argument of this sub-section, TFF is a mature and strong online community. Participation in the community is apparent, allowing the network to grow and strengthen over time. Key to this is that fora require an appropriate level of moderation and

must allow freedom of expression in order to cultivate lasting membership. While it may not be the chief motivation for joining the forum, which here would be farming concerns, and whilst the political is not the most popular subsection, we may deduce from the use of the subsection that political expression is certainly an important element in the forum.

TFF is bounded by a perceived common identity. This identity has fostered a community that transcends many of the physical and social boundaries its members experience in daily life. Members actively pursue this identity so as to become more connected within the community. This process inadvertently grants them greater influence and power therein. When discussion turns to political topics, core members are able to violently manipulate this shared notion of commonality so as to silence opposition and maintain their own status. This is how I define the prior mentioned phenomenon of 'bonding through hostility'; whilst those core members are acting in self-interest, pursuing an anti-political cause, they are also reasserting this fictive notion that there is in-fact a simple and definable 'British Farmer', drawing in those members with lesser distinction and offering the opportunity to gain status in agreement.

This identity, therefore, is both innately political and intolerant of political difference. The forum, on the one hand, provides a space for British farmers to cooperate and share knowledge, but when this cooperation takes on a political guise, perhaps that of collectively improving their own lives, members are bitterly divided. It is this that has driven the forum forward through time; the "off-topic" or "Brexit and Politics" subsection is the ugly underbelly that enables members to "let off steam" and maintain a forum while the wider, predominantly agricultural subsections may maintain a personality of amicability and co-operation, empty of political difference. Elements of the community seem incapable of political action or debate without insult and injury. In the following chapters, I will come back to this and explain in greater detail how this has **created an online arena susceptible to the form of populism seen in the recent Brexit referendum, and how this might influence the future of agricultural governance post-Brexit.**

CHAPTER 3: THE ONLINE POLITICAL FRONTIER

How was Brexit conceived within thefarmingforum.co.uk and how have farmers therein dealt with political difference and or coalition?

In the previous chapter I have established that TFF is a highly political community, cohesive due to a shared and sought-after but ultimately imagined identity. In the following sections, I will delve into the subject of Brexit as a unique political phenomenon within TFF. I will develop a link between the social order and the implications for the quality of debate therein. I will briefly consider the remarks and concerns expressed in the lead up to and in the wake of the Brexit referendum. I will attempt to portray the breadth of opinion and consider whether this saturation of information has come to epitomize the way in which the site has lost its discursive significance with reels and reels of information given repetitively and consistently.

I attempt to argue that *Affect* has become the distinguishing political motif in TFF. Defined by Patricia Clough, writing in Karatzogianni & Kuntsman's book *Digital Cultures and Politics of Emotion* (2012: 23), affect is a 'bodily readiness, a to trigger action, including the action of feeling an emotion'. It is the emotional experience that moves through bodies and minds to induce certain actions differing from strictly emotive feeling with its non-conscious roots. It stems not from the individual but simply treats an actor as a vector as it moves through the collective (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012). According to Christoffer Kølvråa, writing in Stage & Knudsen's *Affective Methodologies* (2015), emotion is the shadow of affect and the clearest medium to measure it in the conscious realm.

It has been indicated that affect has the potential to increase political capacity through 'amplified' connection (Clough, 2012). In the case of TFF, exchange of emotion in the form of violent language secures the forum's inability for civility. Any move to coherent argument is overwhelmed by a constant barrage of undermining and fact checking. A total lack of respect for difference emerges. This is strongly evident in the Remain-Leave dualism; disillusionment in the validity of the oppositions argument diminishes hugely the ability to generate *politics* (Mouffe, 1993). The community, without depth of analysis, charged by mounting distaste from the opposition, is then extremely susceptible to populism, as I will explain in depth in Chapter 4.

3.1 The Brexit Spectrum

My study began, as outlined in the Methodology, with a broad observation of the main themes of Britain's relationship with the EU including subsidies, bureaucracy and regulation, corruption and cooperation, immigration and culture. The first two themes explicitly impact on agriculture as a whole, while the latter relate to broader political motivations. Trade has been a further concern but is seen as an undergirding theme in each of the aforementioned subjects, too grand and intertwined to warrant a separate area of study, as will become clearer in the next chapter. Each of these issues is represented by members from both extremes of the political spectrum.

For many the idea of participating in the EU is a means to destroy British culture and all that is Britain, whereas, so called 'Trolls' are ever present to challenge the nationalist sentiment;

“Took away my gallons and acres my shillings and my cwts my lbs and my ounces had a good go at my miles my feet and inches, that's just for starters

Thread on what did the EU ever do for us?, Maize Seller^{xxxv}

“With people in the UK happy to sell out our country, I feel sorry for the millions who died to give us our freedom, for people to just give it away!”

Thread on 42 Farming Figures called Remain, RobertJ^{xxxvi}

“99% of the pro Brexit ideology is borne out of “nationalism”. It's not got [n]ought to do with fact, logic or reason. It's that primeval instinct deep in the souls of the Brexit folks. They want to be British again.”

Thread on Hard Facts, Cinderbush^{xxxvii}

“Cinderbush & DennisL are racist against the English...”

Interview 6, Angry Midget^{xxxviii}

Maize Seller promotes a popular idea that EU membership is diluting British culture. He believes that by turning to the metric system, the British are losing the essence of what it is to be British. RobertL supports this sentiment; not voting to leave the EU has the effect of ‘selling’ national identity. He goes on to invoke an extremely emotive subject in British culture, referring to the losses made in WW2. The victory of the Allied Powers and the high price paid is a strong theme within British nationalism. Political raconteur and leading Leave politician, Boris Johnson, famously referred to the EU as the effective victory of Germany, completing Hitler’s vision of a unified Europe only with “different methods” (Ross, 2016). He went so far as to call British Leave voters ‘the heroes of Europe’, equating victory in WW2 to victory in Brexit. This attitude, judging by his position within the campaign (he was expected to become Prime Minister following the referendum), was instrumental in securing British withdrawal from the EU. This sentiment is widely evident within the forum and is generally accepted as a sound political position.

Cinderbush, the renowned Troll, speaks radically against this view, explicitly calling it for what it is; nationalism. His use of hyperbole, however, stating, amongst other things, that ‘99% of Brexit is drawn from this ideology, is ultimately damaging for his cause. He breaks through the apolitical⁶ mode of jingoism to reveal an ugly pedestrianism to the Brexit celebration, but in so doing he belittles his own argument. The result, as seen in the final quote from Angry Midget, is that he is accused of racism, an unacceptable position within modern British democracy. The Leave voter uses the language of the progressive left against Cinderbush, reducing his ideological naysaying to just that, a reactionary dinosaur in the wake of a new, sovereign ‘Great’ Britain. The effect of engaging politically can thus be shown to result in merely hardening perspectives.

Considering regulation and bureaucracy, then, it is widely believed that a withdrawal from the EU would result in a huge reduction of the ‘red-tape’ that prevents farmers from accessing certain prohibited resources (such as GM crops, herbicides, animal growth hormones), less governmental intervention in on-farm practices (such as environmental agenda, animal welfare restrictions) and a minimization of the arduous paperwork required to run a farm business;

⁶ Apolitical, as opposed to antipolitical, is that which is already widely agreed to be a norm beyond political discussion, in this instance, a patriotic sentiment toward the UK.

“I have 250 sheep and some arable. I import 20 tonnes of nitrate per annum, I don't import or export muck. At a glance it is obvious I don't exceed any limit for loading the environment with nitrate or nitrous oxides, or ammonia yet soon they won't [be] satisfied till I have analysed and weighed every load of muck spread on out of the lambing pens and a host of other recording requirements that I already have to do which add nothing at all to nitrate management.”

Entre Thread, MrNitwit^{xxxix}

“I personally believe the main reason, so many farmers voted Brexit is purely and simply the paperwork.”

Interview 21, Retired Agrarian^{xl}

MrNitwit expresses a genuine concern for the well-being of his business. It is ubiquitous within TFF that farmers believe they spend more time than they can afford completing paperwork, particularly regarding their use of potentially hazardous materials. It is seen as patronising, a means for the EU to demonise their profession, to suggest that they are unfit to run their own businesses proficiently and, through the overwhelming amount of documentation, to devalue the environmental outcome. They live in fear that this regulation will lead to more rigorous inspection or further chemical prohibitions, as in the aforementioned glyphosate debate. Retired Agrarian believes this issue to be so salient as to be the main driver for Brexit. This bottled up frustration for the perceived invasion into the livelihood of the individual may well have been a dominant force, however, as Retired Agrarian later told me, he does not consider that this is necessarily justified;

“I do not believe this paperwork will go away and farmers have been misled by those who have blamed all this bureaucracy on the EU instead as must take the blame for most Whitehall.”

Interview 21, Retired Agrarian^{xli}

There is no evidence in the offline world to suggest that withdrawal from the EU will lead to any such reduction. As Retired Agrarian ascribes, the EU has come to embody all of the failings of agricultural governance, whilst much of the dissatisfaction stems actually from the actions of the UK government rather than any outside force. Believing that this might change post-withdrawal is probably misled; current secretary of DEFRA, Michael Gove, is promising a ‘Green Brexit’, seemingly extending these methods of control (Gove, 2018). A further notable argument comes from leading Brexiteer and TFF member, Dragon;

“There is no diminution to national sovereignty by creating laws within a country, it is the external imposition of them that emasculates”

Interview 1, Dragon^{xlii}

His rebuttal challenges the notion that the policies are the problem stating rather that it is the institution that suggests them that causes dissatisfaction. He believes that the removal of this ‘external imposition’ will solve the problem but makes no reference as to what this would look like in practice. He disregards the nature of the issue and simply employs it as a reminder that the EU is encroaching on British ‘sovereignty’.

A further problem arising from this particular agenda is occasionally mentioned; if the assumption that there will be a reduction in bureaucracy and loosening of so called EU

standardisation becomes a reality, the UK may not be able to trade with any of its regional export markets;

*'If we use gm maize in our feed (we have to show our bills for feed) we can't sell our animals.
Simples. But you carry on.'*

Thread on Glyphosate Vs Brexit, SpanishFriend^{xliii}

This contributor takes on board that total rejection of EU regulation, from this perspective, may be detrimental to the farming cause. Removing the said regulations might disallow products entering a European market, Britain's closest and most lucrative trading zone. Nevertheless, many proponents argue that this would have the effect of opening to Common Wealth markets instead. The countries of the Commonwealth, however, are in many cases extremely far away and, in any event, are widely adopting similar environmental schemes. Furthermore, any move from the government to revoke current regulations would be political suicide considering farmers' minimal political power in comparison to the well-established environmental movement (Gove, 2018). This belief in an EU free Britain as a country free of environmental regulation, restriction and bureaucracy has been shown within the forum to be irrational, yet proceeds as the dominant hope, even 15 months after the result. This evidences how, even when faced with apparent logic, participants may prefer to counter it with any convoluted terms, remaining blind to the reality of the politics at hand.

The debate on immigration is a crucial one for the broad British electorate. It would be easy to accuse participants of simply having racist roots, but it cannot be denied that, in the agricultural debate over the referendum this became a salient and political issue. Seasonal migrant work forces keep much of the labour-intensive farming pursuits in the UK afloat. Catastrophe has already struck in the two farming seasons since the referendum. Various areas of the industry were left with a deficit of 4000 workers and fruit was left to rot in fields (Carrington, 2018). There were some within the forum which supported this view;

"There are swathes of jobs that the unemployable of this country can't and won't take. Immigrants do them. They contribute more in taxes than sheep farmers as they are on PAYE and can't buy a new tractor just to avoid paying them."

Thread on Sheep farmers voting out?, BVEvans^{xliv}

"I have no issues with imigration or all the other over hyped Daily Mail myths about the EU and wonky bananas etc ! I have no nationalists attitude etc, I'm glad we live in a diverse and multicultural society."

Thread on TFF IN OR OUT? John^{xlv}

In this way the farming community might shed light on the value of immigration, both culturally and financially. While they by no means came out to defend this point 'en masse' or assert immigration as a political 'must have', the points laid out above are a refreshing attitude in comparison to the mentioned 'Daily Mail myths' – referring to sensationalised tabloid media. BVEvans goes as far to accuse his fellow farmers as being of less financial worth than immigrant labour, an extremely controversial accusation considering the aforementioned focus on community and identity. This bravery, however, is short lived, as multiple incidents of unquestionable racism do occur often and are unabated within the forum;

"Civilised society" seems to be full of people actively putting down the ordinary average man whilst enabling and even actively importing perpetrators."

Thread on Capital Punishment, Angry Midget^{xlvi}

Angry Midget, in a conversation regarding capital punishment, considers international immigration as 'importing' criminals to the UK. In the same light as the first Trumpian scandal smearing all Mexican immigrants as rapists, Angry Midget suggests the death penalty is a viable solution besides halting movement of labour. A forum that allows this sort of hatred to fester without challenge and, in some cases, to gather support, does not reflect well on the status of the community as a whole. Although the sentiments expressed are limited in number and can be attributed to a few isolated members, they are in no way challenged within TFF. Of the discussions I have observed I have not extrapolated a strong view on either side of the immigration debate, perhaps because of past mistakes leading to censorship and forum collapse, the forum has been structured as one where more extreme ideas are not tolerated. Alternatively, opposing members may well feel the debate is below them, an unsuitable and crass discussion for online farmers. On a less extreme level, arguably racist or not, there is wide support for controlled immigration, limited to skilled workers, rather than the current EU-wide free labour movement scheme;

"Mass immigration will bring this country down, it effects the health service education and the security of this contry, and your collective foot happens to be an uncollected unaccountable one, do I worry about a few pence on a lamb when I'm standing in a 4 hour queue to see a doctor who's so over worked hes falling asleep, democracy was built on the right to vote"

Thread on Sheep Farmers voting out?, Hay Turner^{xlvii}

This level of conservatism comes as no surprise from the agricultural community. In fact, the belief that the UK has become overcrowded, stretching the burden on welfare services, is a widely held and accepted political position in the UK as a whole. The opposing view, that this era of 'failing multiculturalism' coincides with the greatest measures of austerity on public spending in British history is paled in comparison (Watts, 2017). The quote from Hay Turner expresses a deep frustration with the overuse and lack of public funding of essential services. He does not care if he can sell a sheep more profitably within the EU if remaining means that he cannot access public services because they are overrun by immigrants. The words of Boris Johnson shine through, as Hay Turner volunteers what he sees as a sacrifice for the good of the country. He even insinuates the current measures are 'undemocratic'. As crude as this argument may seem, it is a fairly well agreed upon position and, due to its centrist collusion, it meets with little to no objection.

The sad fact is that immigration politics is somewhat beyond the scope of the forum, however, when the possibility came to act as a community to help those other farmers who depended on the outcome of immigration, no action was made, just a lulling tolerance of racism. Rather than hold a discussion to determine what the best outcome of the migrant labour workforce in Brexit would be for agriculturalists nationwide, TFF is overcome by other, more nationalist concerns.

Some within the forum support the EU for its grounding principles; an economic, political and social companionship based on peace and mutual gain:

“the point is that when a country/people run short of resources or outgrow their home they look to move to other areas....this brings them into conflict with the people already in these areas....the best way to stop it is to co-operate to ensure everyone is prosperous...and TBF the eu has done a good job”

Thread on what did the EU ever do for us?, Hand Wash^{xlviii}

The ‘better together’ view has been widely supported by members. Many threads begin with a subject such as; greater peace in remain, favourable trade deals, expanding job markets, diplomatic prestige and, as can be seen from Hand Wash, access to resources. Certainly, as he disputes, there is logic in this; sharing prosperity rather than resulting in violence and he applauds the EU for this. This celebration, unfortunately, has been drowned out by mounting accusations that the EU has become corrupted from its original doctrine:

“you must remember that it isn't EU money that pays the subsidy and they know it; it is British money that has been sent to the EU, and they only get back pennies in the pound”

Interview 1, Dragon^{xlix}

Nitro: *“And what good have they done for us overthere”*

Troglodyte: *“About as much good as any other 24 bods in a cauldron of 750 thieves.”*

Thread on 42 Farming Figures called Remain!

Dragon describes the minimal financial returns Britain gains in the form of subsidies from its tax input. This is a legitimate political concern for many, arguing that they would rather have their taxes go directly to British agriculture than fund development in Eastern Europe. This number, however, is never regarded within the grander scheme of EU benefits and trade. Like so many issues, it is boiled down to the fact the membership fees are higher than the direct cash reimbursement, and is therefore a cause for great concern, and enough to tarnish all EU initiatives as corrupted.

The second quote above attributed to Troglodyte refers to the European parliament, the democratic representatives of each member nation. He dismisses them as “thieves”, a frequently sited assertion that all those who work for the EU are parasites, taking advantage of British success. Of course, concerns as to the monetary and corporate motivations of EU policy is growing even within Europe, but to denounce elected representatives as thieves is hardly a valid position. TFF, by its very nature, is a space that facilitates this kind of imprudence without need for argument or proof. It appears that the forum as a community celebrates these highly provocative statements and is far more receptive to emotive sentiment than perhaps the labour politics outlined in regard to immigration.

The most often defended aspect of the CAP is that a large portion of British agriculture is dependent on it;

“welsh agriculture is bankrupt without the sub “

Interview 16, Mythical Antelope^{li}

The quote above was proudly boasted as the interviewee informed me of his contingency plan once the subsidies were removed. This is not from a Remainer, desperate to hold onto his livelihood; this is a calculated individual, prepared for this eventuality. In fact, as mentioned in the Introduction, it has been surmised that 55% of farm income in the UK comes directly from the EU. Therefore, losing the subsidy is a very real danger for the majority of British farmers. As can be seen on the forum, there exists an even more common and whimsical attitude to subsidies:

“most of us here manage for the freebies- sunshine, rainfall, CO2 - and leave the sponsored farmers to gamble with the big money.”

Interview 22, New Zealand Sam and Agriculturalist Jim^{lii}

“they give me a nice cheque every year”

Thread on what did the EU ever do for us?, Jones^{liii}

It may be considered somewhat dangerous to take such a light-hearted attitude to such a contentious and detrimental issue. Subsidies in developed countries are often disputed for artificially destabilising foreign markets (Ghosh, 2013). Since New Zealand abolished their subsidies they have developed an extremely efficient low input style of farming, as seen in the first of the two quotes. They are very proud of their success, even joking that Europeans are somehow ‘sponsored’. This humour is extended by Jones, he sees the EU as little more than a source of cash, an occasional perk.

There is evidently logic to the removal of subsidies, and between public support for development abroad, a wish to end undeserved income to the land-owning elite and a move to more environmentally concerned support measures, there is a unified front within the national electorate. The severity of the issue, however, is rarely considered. This desensitisation to the subsidy, as expressed in the two quotes above, disguises the grounding basis EU subsidies have provided for British agriculture. UK farmers have been financially supported since WW2 and the motion for Brexit exposes that safety blanket to real danger. A collapse in the farming industry could see the UK facing potentially disastrous food shortages, forcing it to become a net importer, something which causes great financial and environmental concern. The general sentiment on the forum, however, is to ignore this very real danger and to foster and celebrate attitudes such as that of SpanishFriend in Chapter 2; ‘if you need a subsidy, you are not a farmer’, enjoying and rejoicing in the anti-EU dissent rather than actually facing the approaching consequences of withdrawal.

3.2 Affective Language

In the previous section I have established that the sort of debate considered often leads to a hardening of perspectives, logic is often met with self-delusion and nationalism is seen to surmount general farming concerns. There appears to be little demand for evidence for the sweeping claims made by participants, being far more receptive to provocative, emotional sentiment rather than logic, leading to a disavowal of the significant risk posed by the issues at hand. This, I posit, resonates with the conception of post-truth outlined in the Introduction; anger and resentment seem to distinguish much of the political positioning discussed above as opposed to critical thinking and reason. In light of this, I wish to argue that **affect** is the dominant influence of politics in TFF. **Rather than a coherent space for debate, issues such as truth and**

rationality are made irrelevant by mounting emotion and receptive action. Put simply, the political is performed when members of TFF fall into impassioned debate, using violent language, undermining and belittling one another's comments, polarising argument to Leave or Remain. An affective charge reverberates between these pillars of Brexit, preventing the possibility for a civil debate or a progressive political vision.

As mentioned earlier, affect is generally considered to have non-conscious roots; it resists substantiation much in the same way as identity (Leve, 2011). Researchers attempting to expand the use of affect into anthropology have often been confronted by this, leading them to explore more creative ways to operationalise it. Emotion is a preeminent example of affect in the conscious realm which can be grounded and analysed empirically. It has been argued, however, that it is somewhat hopeful to attempt to analyse this through text alone. Kolvraa challenges this assumption in his essay on affective methodologies, suggesting that he is confounded as to why this remains such a rare inquiry. He asserts that far right politics is the perfect place to start such an endeavour; he writes 'affect seems nowhere more at home in the political spectrum than in and around the Far Right' (Stage & Knudsen, 2015: 185). Affect, he affirms, is clearly embodied both in the way right wing politics is enacted, through rage and distress, and in its reception, shock and horror. It mediates extremes on both sides of the reactionary scale. This conceptualisation, in this study, is both a novel and a fruitful methodology.

While it would be an overstatement to deem TFF a Far-Right platform, those who behave this way on the forum, as Kolvraa suggests, heavily outweigh the rest of the actors, both politically and in terms of affect. All of the above examples have aspects of truth and reason which are overcome by prevailing emotion, but these incidences, represented out of context, do not instil the gravity that affect has when moving through an entire thread. This is exemplified by the following debate on subsidies, found in a thread regarding "hard facts":

OrangeHead: *"It's everywhere -tv news, papers, radio and at least 10 threads on TFF. Some say "this will happen" some say "that will happen". It's all speculation and guesswork. There's far too much stuff to read/listen to; half of which is a load of waffle and hot air from people with their own axe to grind. It's high time both sides came out with a proper "manifesto" stating clearly, backed up with facts and figures, what a vote in their favour would mean to those of us who live in the real world. Preferably sooner rather than later before my fudging head explodes. How else can anyone make the right decision"*

Prof Peter: *"Without subsidies or a devalued pound, the beef and lamb that I and the overwhelming majority of upland and hill farmer produce would no longer be economically viable to farm. This is economic **fact**, not opinion."*

Hay Turner: *"TTIP will make sure it's even cheaper. The estimate here is at least a 10% reduction in beef prices."*

Nitro: *"The Subs are here for at least 4 more years if we stay in, all we get from the out group is words with nothing to back it up. I Am beginning to think we will be better off staying in and sacking all our civil servants cause that where our problems come from"*

Dansz: *"When did you think otherwise? The issue is brussels making a load of laws up, then telling our civil service to perform the end outcome by whatever means necessary."*

Nitro: *"If they can show me that i will be better off out than that is the way i will vote, waffling on about how our civil servants won't put more red tape in front of us when all the evidence is they make more for us is not going to change my mind"*

Dansz: *"did you actually read what i put?"*

Prof Peter: *"Waffle"*

Dansz: *"bare bones civil service, where is the job creation schemes gonna come from anymore? i **know you're scared to death of losing your subs**, but come on."*

Craggy: *"The subsidy is not related to producing lamb, its AREA based, but if **your daft enough to subsidise sheep** then rock on but you wont last as the sub is going anyway slowly but surely."*

Prof Peter: *"No, no, I capitulate, you're entirely correct. I really should not be concerned with the threat to my livelihood, or that of neighbours, or for the future of my children. I really ought to agree with all the rhetoric and opinion spouted repeatedly, and vote to leave. It would mean far less aggressive bullying from all the right wing campaigners on here for a start! Errrr, no, until there are **HARD FACTS** that my life and livelihood won't cease to exist, do you really think I and all the other thousands of farmers in my position should follow your propoganda and wear the **brown shirt? Come on, hard facts!**"*

Thread on "Hard Facts"^{liv}

In this clash, an altercation that took place in February of 2016, four months before the referendum, potential voters with borderline Remain/Leave views secure their political positions. The thread opens with a plea for no 'waffle', to avoid asserting trivialities without purpose and to focus on facts as a break from sensational news-paper reports. This is a heartfelt outcry for clarity in the midst of consistent and repetitive confusion. The proceeding arguments, however, do exactly the opposite.

Later in the thread, the topic turns to subsidies. Prof Peter asserts that Brexit may adversely affect his business, and while it is perhaps wrong to state any economic eventuality as 'fact', he makes a well-reasoned and realistic argument. Following a Leave vote, and the possible removal of the CAP, it is likely farming marginal land with small livestock numbers will no longer be economically viable. The merit of this argument is supported by Hay Turner, and again by Nitro. They agree that perhaps it is better to vote Remain and adjust the internal governmental structure. The debate shifts as Dansz interprets the situation differently; it is the EU that has caused this problem in British governance, and it should be 'them' who suffer. Thus, the conversation veers tangentially away from subsidies toward expressions of ill-feeling and revenge on the EU. Nitro then accuses Prof of 'waffling', the specific opening pretense of the entire thread. He throws back this phrase used in the very opening line to devalue the Prof's differing opinion. The situation escalates when Dansz realizes he is being cornered and asks for civility rather than ignorance. Nitro is then supported by Prof Peter, silencing his argument once again with the repetition of "waffle". This exemplifies well the affective force in politics as two collude to devalue the contribution of another.

The aggression escalates further as Dansz retaliates, calling the other two 'cowards' for hiding behind a subsidy, despite Prof Peter's early clarification that he could not survive without it. This marks a break with rationality. The debate is no longer about content, but instead an affective shouting match. Dansz is supported by Craggy who purports that it was 'daft' to consider subsidising them in the first place and celebrating the prospect of their demise. The sentiment

here seems to contain real violence, the accusers effectively welcoming the end of fellow community members' livelihoods.

Prof Peter is reduced to sarcasm in response, to insult the others and ridicule their short-sightedness. Whilst he has previously made a genuine argument against the consequences of Brexit, he now debases it and belittles himself by insinuating that the other instigators are Nazis (brown shirts) and, again, denying that their argument has any validity.

This thread typifies the way in which debate is carried on within the political subsection. The result, rather than the coherent discussion called for in the opening post, is, perhaps ironically, dualism with each participating and observing member being forced to pick an affective side; Remain or Leave. A whole new vocabulary emerges, deeming 'Brexiters' as a wave of scapegoating fascists, and 'Remoaners' as a conspiracy of fear mongering naysayers:

"They'll have to find some other institution to blame then. Brexiters were always there they just never realised how many others were out there."

Interview 7, BVEvans^{lv}

"I'm saying your constant blaming everything including the weather on Blair and Labour and so on is poppycock."

Thread on Hungarian Immigration, Cinderbush^{lvi}

B.V.Evans recognises that the [affective] force that has boiled over in the referendum has existed for a long time; he debases the validity of the arguments put forward by the Leave voters with his comments on the "blame" culture. While in some sense he is alluding to the consistent struggle of the antagonists within the political, here he references the ephemeral nature of Brexitism, and in so doing, rejects any notion of a truly political motivation for a Brexit. Cinderbush, in a similar light goes further, suggesting that even the weather is considered to be culpable for a Brexit voter, thus poking fun at the entire movement.

"In fact ' more scare stories ' is now the default answer to any scenario put forward by Remain regardless of who says it or how valid it may or may not be."

Thread on Sheep Farmers voting Out, Dartmoor^{lvii}

"Whereas the remain argument was based on doom, destruction and the third WW if I remember"

Thread on Brexit has been cancelled, Jim2^{lviii}

"I don't care nor listen to the doom-sayers any longer."

Thread on For All the Brexit Doom and Gloomers, Max6767676^{lix}

The pro-Brexit actors accuse Remainers of cowardice, foreseeing catastrophic doom in a Britain free of the EU. Dartmoor accuses the Remain camp of meeting any potential positive outcome of Brexit with unwarranted pessimism. Jim2 jokes that any motion to Remain is rooted in fear of a third world war. The damage of this kind of politics is revealed in the final quote; Max6767676 proudly announces in the opening of this thread, that he has shut off to the opposition and will no longer engage with them. This is the lasting effect of an antipolitical environment.

As Christoffer Kølvråa writes, 'the impact of affect on a political space is... the elimination of the option to remain indifferent' (Stage & Knudsen, 2015: 195). I have laid out the general perspectives above; most, if not all, fall into the category of Remain or Leave, and their stereotypical views are reiterated, manipulated, regurgitated and repeated over and over again

throughout the clashes that I have encountered within TFF. I posit that this is due to the channelling of emotion via the perceived identity outlined previously.

Clough, cited by Andrejevic (2013: 98), writes that in an era of online political discourse 'affective modulation and individuation displace subject formation and ideological interpellation as central to the relation of governance and economy'. In other words, the means of transferring and manifesting emotive action, as seen in the previous debate, and the act of identity creation in online spaces alluded to in Chapter Two, have overwhelmed the traditional means for political interaction. The act of existing within such online fora forces an actor to fabricate and adopt an identity. That identity must be somehow connected or disconnected to the others within the forum in order to have any impact or for that individual to be recognised as a distinctive person.

Expression of the self in the form of a profile picture, an alias, a status and a small profile summary, is, therefore, a fundamental political act. This creation of identity is set in motion even before a member posts on the site and colours all of its encounters there on. For example, a plain and unimaginative profile, such as that of Noah, who actively avoids Brexit topics, uses only a first name and does not brandish a profile picture, reflecting a member not looking to assert himself. Equally, members NFU rep and John, the site administrator, use similarly bland profiles to minimise their political impact in order to not shine a poor light or strong position on the institutions they represent. Whereas, Artichoke Mind, who enters the forum specifically to research her reception, is provocative, using a very flattering professional photograph for her profile picture, deliberately seeking attention.

This aforementioned affective labour (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012), that instils particular identities with meaning and maintains an online presence, is the central basis for political expression in TFF. In this respect identity becomes a significant aspect of the Brexit debate, both sides employing conceptions of what they perceive to be 'British farmer' to argue their point. Under such circumstances, Brexiteer and Remoaner become defining extensions of the perceived identity. Each side is equally responsible for constructing the prevailing dualism.

As established at the end of the previous chapter, assertion of identity in political debate produces two outcomes in TFF social loafer community; silencing political opposition and conserving the status of core members. The assertion that 'if a member votes Leave/Remain he is not British Farmer', is a tool used on both sides to steer debate and exercise political authority. The observer and/or opponent must then either conform to this belief or respond with a similarly violent argument in regard to identity to equal the affective charge. It is here that debate begins to polarize, truth loses purchase and affect takes over.

In the example given on the thread "Hard Facts", what began as a very clear acknowledgment of the poor quality of debate in TFF, pleading for clarity, quickly descends to name calling. Dansz is a 'waffler' and a Nazi, while his opponents are afraid to act politically and are redundant farmers; neither party is deemed suitable to debate on TFF by his Other. On both sides these accusations are not factual; this use of violent language is rather an assertion of identity, attempting to silence the Other, usurp power and bolster one's own and one's party's prestige.

This instance of identity divides the two pillars of Brexit, each totally incompatible with the other. Two polarities emerge which negate the possibility of a middle ground or the recognition of the Other. This is what I define as the Brexit dualism. To consider the opposing view is to cheapen one's own identity, the only means of gaining power and distinction within the forum. This, I believe, is why even almost a year after the referendum, even as new information comes to light revealing corruption and lies on both sides, I did not discover one member who had changed his mind or expressed any qualms about the efficacy of his vote.

Therefore, whilst Brexit may have entered the forum a salient political issue, it has been hijacked by competing affective identities, each of which purvey little to no respect for the opposition, resulting in an antipolitical agenda. Each side of the dualism is painted as the sole reason for the others disparity and seemingly constructed in accordance. The 'Remoaner' supports the EU and is therefore in favour of a corrupt establishment, paralyzed by fear of falling from power; Leave voters are valiant and brave, daringly going where no Remoaners would tread. From the Remain viewpoint, Brexiteers are irrational, short sighted and determined by the whim of sensational newspapers, whereas they themselves are superior in reason and education, able to condescend to the others. Adrejevic writes;

"when the Others words are always suspect, when language is stripped of its deliberative purchase, we are left somewhat helplessly stranded within the horizon of our own unchangeable preconceptions... [Threads become simply] strings of correlations that carry an affective charge"
(2013: 250-6).

Andrejevic recognises the hopelessness of this situation and the futility in the continuation of argument but, nevertheless, the affective 'charge' pushes forward. The Other, in this instance either Remoaner or Brexiteer, is under constant suspicion. Without the capability of seeing value in the Other's words, the Subject is left only with his preconception, viewing the opposite number merely as a "scapegoater" (Brexiteer) or "fear-monger" (Remoaner).

"Affect is a vector of unqualified intensity seeking future actualization; it is a vehicle from one dimension of time to another" (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012: 23). Although these parties find it impossible to hold a rational debate within TFF, affect, so intricately woven through and indivisible from online identity and community, continues to feed the violence of the argument between the actors. It acts to reify the divide, continually 'Othering' opposition, constructing policies based on the essential difference of the Other. It would appear that the emotional wrangling is the main attraction to certain members of TFF. I was reminded of this on the 5th of December 2017. In the days following President Trump's re-tweet of a comment made by a member of the infamous UK right wing party, Britain First⁷. As a result of his actions, TFF traffic and posting grew wild, stretched the web domain capacity and I suffered my first website crash.

Affect emerges as the defining political mode in TFF where other analytical conceptions fail. My original view of the forum was as part of a political culture, a "system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which define the situation in which political action takes place" (Reisinger, 1995: 334). TFF appeared to be rooted in democracy; despite the tensions referenced above, I perceived an undergirding belief in equality and the shared governance on which the forum was founded. This is, however, insufficient to explain the scale and growth of the two competing pillars of Brexitism. This demands an action-oriented research agenda, seeing affect as a means to conceptualise the process of performing the political through immersive research, attempting to examine the research sample as a whole (Stage & Knudsen, 2015). Affect captures the dynamism of TFF as a form of social media and entertainment, 'un-serious' politics, rather than a praxis of agricultural democracy. This is not to suggest that it has any less of a 'serious' impact (Stage & Knudsen, 2015).

Political culture theory is in contrast to the process of engaging an online political self. It is broadly accepted in the existing literature that no political culture can be defined apart from its

⁷ Donald Trump expressed support for Britain First Islamophobic video (Dearden, 2017)

broader society (Reisinger, 1995). Therefore, in many instances it refrains from or overlooks the salience of individuality, paying greater attention to the structural rules and expectation of the subjective whole. As Svensson (2012: 185) writes, 'It would therefore be wrong to conceive of late modern individualization and a sense of collectiveness as mutually exclusive'. Individuality or identity and connection are very tightly linked in online forms of communication and affect evidenced here allows analysis both of the actor and the broader collective. Clear affective pathways emerge through political action and reaction rather than attempting to consider the position of TFF and its members within the wider British political context. I have covered the structural implication of TFF in Chapter 2 from which can be seen that, whilst a level of behaviour and self-control is expected within TFF, a great deal of leniency appears to be granted, perhaps as a reaction to the destructive nature of censorship in the forum's past.

Affect is an advantageous theory for Netnography. Online environments critically reduce participation bias. An anthropologist must observe without influencing the sample population. Considering the sensitive nature of affect, this is an integral element in order to avoid an auto-ethnographic study. It allows for the drawing out of affective elements, such as the introduction of alcohol. I was told on several occasions that time of day has a distinct effect on the nature of debate. Whilst I did not consider this as a variable, it was clearly exemplified with several contributors accusing others' more violent use of language on pub closing times with members under the influence of alcohol using the forum to vent rage.

This demonstrates both how vulnerable debate is to manipulation and how aware or otherwise online actors may be of this. Ulterior factors could be employed to cynically misuse political fora. The nature of debate invites and celebrates those with an intensified, emotive position. The online-offline divide may obscure the reality of affect, not only disguising the salience of topics discussed but also the state of the actor disputing it. The very nature of 'going online' in a forum such as this which deliberately avoids censorship leaves the actors open to manipulation one by the other or by outside agency. This is the subject of a whole further study outside of the remit of this work. I simply note it in passing.

Exchange within TFF can be fickle and ephemeral. Crucially, employing affect can show how debate may be ferocious but might then dissipate when the online political self is compromised by an overarching offline connection. In this sense, analysis in terms of affect may reveal and explain incidents where no other could. The following thread opens with an infuriated Joseph, referring to Nigel Farage, leading British MEP and the face of Brexit, happily accepting a large EU pension:

Joseph : *"Good to see that the great Brexiteer and man to clean up evil and corrupt Europe is going to accept his £73k annual pension from said organisation. Good to see our leaving fees are going to such worthy causes."*

The thread erupts into a slinging match between supporters and opponents:

1160 Uber J: *"Farage deserves every penny. The blokes a hero."*

It then descends into undermining other actors and questioning their posited facts:

Chizuk: *"I chose to vote leave to get our 3rd world nation back to where it belongs into the top six of countries in the worlds."*

Retired Agrarian: *“umm, so you want us to drop a place in the world order! we are currently 5th. just behind France”*

Angry Midget: *“How do you make the leap from Brexit to supporting Labour ... the EU is Socialist ... there is no point replying to something which is obviously not true.”*

The discussion moves on to university fees, still using the same unpleasant rhetoric:

WeldingTim : *“I am in favour of selective government help with tuition fees, for instance doctors, nurses , engineers and scientists provided that they undertake to work full time in this country for at least five years after graduation. Course dropouts, without good reason, should be fined, as should "year outs" swanning round the world. All degrees of no economic value should not be funded but their fees should rise to compensate.”*

Angry Midget: *“Weren't some of these "Universities" little more than a means to gain entry to the UK, use the student loan to run a business & then buy the degree using contract writers ?”*

The debate completely flips when two opposing combatants realise they used to work for the same organisation:

WeldingTim: *‘Spot on. On all counts correct and I am sure our paths may have crossed at some time.’*

SpanishFriend: *‘I started veg in 86. Briefly bought seed from Sinclair McGill (was that ici?) but they finished? And moved to elsoms for about 20 years. Now feeling annoyed with myself a can't remember the guys name I always spoke to. Colin I think, with a beard..’*

Thread on Nigel £££x

The thread continues as such for another page as the pair reminisce and exchange stories, without reference to the previous angry exchange, and then, without the affective charge, it disperses and closes. This thread is significant for two critical reasons. First, crossing from online to offline actualisation has the power to transcend affective identity and introduce relationships from a broader context. The discovery of an actual commonality between these two members drops the negative affective charge, and they begin to bond through aspects of their offline identities. Second, this extinguishing of dissented affect ends the thread. Without the force for debate exhibited as building anger and distrust, there is no longer any motivation for discussion. Instead, members begin to post on other threads, obtaining no satisfaction here and so looking elsewhere to continue their perverse enjoyment in affect. This is much the way many threads end; either an eruption or a smothering of affect. I came across a number of similar instances of such offline destruction. In one altercation, a member is asked to verify his credentials as a lawyer and refuses; another actor often utilises his children as a sort of affective currency.

SpanishFriend: *“I don't quite understand why @Dragon brings up his own kids?”*

Dragon: *“I mentioned my children because they are the most precious lives to me”*

When I introduced myself to interview him, the first message I received read;

“Happy to do it as you please, in general you’ll get more responses when the weather is bad, my paperwork is up to date and I have no familial obligations.”

Interview 1, Dragon^{lxii}

Dragon regularly references his family in this way, using his children to make a point. The drawing of sensitive offline information in this case appears to have the effect of crushing debate for other actors involved. By using offline information, Dragon seemingly withdraws from his ‘online identity’ which is confusing for the others. This character is generally a hard line Brexiteer and capable of using fairly intemperate language to force his agenda but his invocation of his family into the argument seems to, perhaps, humanise him too much and to floor all other players. When I came to speak to him, however, he was quite open that in fact he has no family. Given this, I posit perhaps somewhat cynically, that he could be just using the “family card” as a mechanism for manipulating debate; that he could actually be a Remainer manipulating debate so as to nullify the arguments being put forward by being aggressive in debate and then effectively closing down the thread. –This is a potential method of discrediting argument if a player wishes to be particularly devious.

My examples above have the result of ending discussion as debate pushes the boundaries of the online world through verification and the loss or expulsion of the charge of affect.

Affect ‘enable[s] the happening of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness – to be investigated’ (Lury & Wakeford, 2012: 3)- this sums up the course of this study; once any kind of rational narrative is removed, replaced by highly affective language, modulation can be the only means of recognising political exchange and its outcomes.

Kølvraa writes, when approaching affective far right politics, content is secondary to style (Stage & Knudsen, 2015). In circumstances where content becomes convoluted, seemingly unimportant and ultimately dead-ended, affect provides inspiration. It is not verifiability and strength of analysis that gives this language its power but its style. A fine example is the aforementioned altercation with Retired Agrarian and Chizuk. Retired Agrarian asserts a truth to deny and belittle the statement of Chizuk (*‘We are currently 5th...’*), but it is not the quality of fact that determines the affect but the witty non-joke that is laid out.

By that measure, political culture theory cannot capture the ephemeral nature of debate. The online antagonism, whilst often without depth or solidification of fact yet carries weight. This is repeated and is generally recognisable across the TFF arena. This is not to say that the forum is not influenced by other structures of power, however, as ulterior inspirations shape the preconceptions which the actors then bring to this online world. As seen in the aforementioned dispute between WeldingTim and SpanishFriend, though, there is an evident difference between online and offline self. While offline connections have the power to override an affective charge, the online charged self is that which dominates posting, irrespective of and anonymous to the offline self.

This form of affective politics is maintained by ritual in entertainment. As Christoffer Kølvraa suggests, unity among communities of excessive affect are not bound by logical articulations of selfhood, but a shared notion of ‘play’ which displaces the need for truth (Stage & Knudsen, 2015). An online identity is not created by sound judgements, by what one does and

does not like. As suggested earlier, true identity is non-communicable. Rather it is a resonation of approval; an acknowledgement of shared emotive sentiment. Andrejevic (2013: 2, 87) refers to this as the "shift from comprehension to correlation". Instead of rationally aligning oneself with a chosen political party, members rally behind their affective team leader, Leave or Remain. The connection of identity and community in online space is, therefore, the affective pursuit of belonging to, partaking and, in a sense **playing** politics.

The community can, then, display aggression but remain an intact whole; the act of affective violence is just as much an invitation to play as a means to injure. Behaviour such as that displayed by Bloggs93 (*Are you honestly suggesting that all paedophiles are Muslim?*) and Angry Midget (*Troll*) on page 28 is accepted as the norm; acts of rational argument can easily be dismissed and become that of the 'Other'. Of course, there is no genuine suggestion that all glyphosate proponents should be deemed non-farmers, that upland farming should be destroyed or that the death penalty should be reinstated to solve the immigration problem as referred to above, but the hyperbole allows the affect to hang in the air. Kolvraa likens this to the question '*how are you?*', or perhaps to a lover telling their partner that they are the most beautiful thing they have ever seen. There is no rationale behind these statements; both parties are aware of the social transaction at play, neither expects a calculated reply or any true sentiment to be expressed (Stage & Knudsen, 2015). Instead, those involved will indulge in the emotion, reciprocating this token bond without the need for conscious comprehension. TFF, sadly, operates more generally with the language of hate rather than love.

By this logic, the entire subsection is absorbed within a network of affect. This can be posited for all members of TFF, despite political disposition. While much of the theory referenced above is concerned with far-right politics, affect draws in the Other. It is a matter of affective transmission received by all members, with right leaning ideologies or not. Speaking frankly, this proved a challenge ethnographically; even as an outsider, viewing the forum through strict, scientific framework, it was difficult not to become embroiled in the arguments, angry and frustrated. Thus, the dualism of Remain against Leave, Left against Right, traduces the Brexit subsection, reducing the potentiality for political discourse to an affective 'pissing contest'⁸.

3.2 Concluding Remarks

The "Brexit & Politics" subsection was born out of Brexit. Prior to the announcement of an upcoming referendum, no solely political topic was ever conceived on any of the preceding fora. The suggestion to grant this stand-alone space came out of a thread entitled 'TFF IN OR OUT' which gained massive traffic and demanded an online poll to predict the outcome. The poll resulted in 71% Leave to 29% Remain of the 696 members who chose to vote (out of 22,960 views). Brexit, therefore, is the cause of politics as a specific topic within TFF. Any future broad range of political debate within TFF will always be haunted by its precursor; Brexit and the Leave victory. Politics then, as a result of the discussion of Brexit, is indelibly perceived through a dualism; a simplification of political discourse to yes or no, good or bad, Leave or Remain.

This black and white simplification of debate brought affective transmission forward as the defining motif of dialogue. As a result, debate began to move further away from a content focused discussion to a form of one-up-manship. The victorious Leave camp had a clear and strict set of arguments; immigration, civil service and subsidy as intrinsically bad, deregulation,

⁸ Pointless, trivial, back and forth argument that never gets resolved.

sovereignty and accountability as good. The consistency and predictability of these policies pales over time in comparison to languages and styles of affect. The crucial thing to acknowledge here is that the debate becomes about things other than Brexit. It is a game of identity; who is right/truthful and who is wrong/false in regard to the ultimately undefinable conception of 'British Farmer'. A winner is rarely decided, the affective charge simply moving to the next subject, and in this process, becoming stripped of its significance. Brexit takes a back seat to the pursuit of truth which, ironically, slips further from grasp.

The repetition is of consistent bad feeling, running throughout threads. Whilst this may be a vent for antagonism, it disempowers and nullifies their true political strength. The continuation of this affective transmission is a game, each member attempting to trump the next, progressing and pushing the forum forward, even bringing members closer together in disputation.

CHAPTER 4: WE'RE OUT, SO WTF DO WE DO NOW?

How does this disclose strategies for post Brexit governance and how does this relate to diffusion of politics through social media?

In the previous two chapters I have firmly posited that, whilst TFF is a political community with powerful means of connection, its politics are seemingly motivated by aggression and status, stifling meaningful debate. Correspondence becomes less about Brexit itself and more concerned with exchange of affect. While the struggles and antagonism of the players are enjoyed, the process of political exclusion debases the means for a platform for positive change. In the following section I will consider how this is enabled, how it influences broader agricultural politics and post-Brexit visions, and how TFF might reflect social media as a medium for politics in general.

Aside from the polarities of Leave-Remain, there is a further force operating within this dualism in the form of uncertainty and disbelief. As I have made clear, content becomes secondary to affect in debate which has resulted in an active rejection of information that does not conform to the given affective narrative. The 'playing' of politics undermines the importance of topics such as subsidies and regulation. The end result is a total rejection of all that is political, turning to what is purveyed as an omnipotent force, beyond human control; the market economy. The violence within the forum is seemingly without limits as protagonists believe the free market is both a safety-net for their suspicion and the righteous alternative to the corrupted establishment.

When the *political* does appear, it is largely built around a perception of identity, as established in previous chapters. Controlled and manipulated by those prolific members, it leads to an overtly populist political arena, as members try to reassert themselves, regain and re-establish the seemingly threatened (imagined) identity that brought them all together.

It is not populism that drives the preference for Leave within TFF but, I would theorise, the way in which members engage with politics more broadly. Core members operate in a style that resembles the populist demagogues of Brexit, which has had two fundamental results; first, as established in earlier chapters, the offline salience in politics is lost; the core members of TFF proffer populist rhetoric that serves more to their online standing than any actual political agenda; second, the seemingly endless affective battle that has captured TFF in the Brexit campaign has turned many members away from politics in general. The majority choose not to contribute (social loafers), however, many, still embroiled within the affective guise, actively reject politics. Paradoxically, due to the painting of Remain as pro-politics, Leave became the obvious choice for those estranged from the entire debate, and gave Brexiteers a strong edge within the forum.

Finally, I outline some reflections on the general field of online study that I may extrapolate from this thesis. I explore how the social makeup has come to formulate how I understand online politics and how this mirrors some of the broader trends of national politics and the internet.

4.1 Safety in Markets

Brexitism, as it has come to be known by some authors within the UK (Finlayson, 2017), is a strange and new form of political discourse. It differs from all that has come before in the way

that expressed uncertainty in the way forward and disbelief in the current position, rather than being countered by calculation and attentiveness, seem to have become justification for political action. Finlayson (2017) writes ‘if you don’t know everything – about climate change, the economy or the political trajectory of Slovenia – then you know nothing’. Building on the affective dualism outlined in the previous chapter, in which the Other’s words are held in suspicion, the total rejection of their ‘truth’ is reciprocated by a celebration of not knowing. In this form of politics, political actors can *know without knowing* (Andrejevic, 2013). It is as though the expression of (shared) ignorance toward a cause is a validated position:

“Brexit is a leap into the unknown as far as I’m concerned. A lot of pundits are very happy to give their opinion and advice, yet nobody has a single clue as to what the next few years will bring for agriculture in this country... The majority voted leave, for whatever reason, so we must move forward and make the most of that IMO.”

Interview 25, TomO^{lxiii}

“brexit summary i dont want to live in a state governed by dictats from failed politicians (eu commissioners) who got their position by licking some ass at a bilderberg meeting what to expect, simples the unexpected what i hope for, freedom from the above democratic deficit”

Interview 15, MOO^{lxiv}

“Why would they get uncontrolled access to our markets or would it be reciprocal? How do you know support in the UK would stop in 2 years after an exit? How do you know the EU would continue to pay support to ag in the EU if they lost their 3rd biggest contributor? Why and how start questions, not statements, but I understand if you don't want to enlighten us... seriously, what is not to like about getting out of the EU?”

Thread on 42 Farming Figures called Remain, RobertJ^{lxv}

Voting for an uncertain future seems to have become a legitimate standpoint. The first quote from TomO, someone who I took to be a Remain voter and not necessarily pleased with the outcome of the referendum, does not understand the motivation for leaving the EU or what the future might hold but he is quite willing to accept whatever comes. He makes no reference to any political antagonism nor does he base his comments on any reason or logic; he merely believes that what is done is done and that the UK should make the best of the situation. The issue here is that TomO does not want to address the deep-rooted causes of Brexit, but rather leave any kind of debate behind for means of a speedy recovery. He sees no value in the views of the opposition. He is clearly not seeking any response or resolution to his dialogue as there can be none. The quote reveals a deeply antipolitical sentiment, however, with TomO expressing how the simple dualism can facilitate a more integrated and dangerous view point than opposition, that the act of not knowing can be a valid reason for action.

The next quote from MOO displays the same sentiment in the opposition camp. It is a summation of his take on Brexit. He announces ‘*what do I expect... the unexpected*’. This is a committed Leave voter, proudly stating that he made his decision and remains convinced based on the lack of validated information provided regarding British withdrawal from the EU.

Both of the above quotes unashamedly reveal a position both denouncing any existing counter arguments and excluding the possibility of hearing any new ones. They know what they do precisely because they do not know or care for the position of the Other (Andrejevic, 2013).

Furthermore, as this phenomenon occurs on both sides of the dualism, it becomes established, regularly accepted and thus serves to reify the ideological gap.

TFF members, particularly from the Leave camp, bear an ardent scepticism for and suspicion of the establishment and the symbolic discourses it professes. MOO refers to those who work for the EU as “*failed politicians who got their position by licking some ass*”. He has no respect for highly qualified officials, sees no value in their existence and considers them a direct threat to his freedom. In addition, he need not know anything about them to make this judgement because, as far as he is concerned, they only achieved their position through behaving badly, through nepotism or otherwise.

Robert J’s comment is made in the aforementioned affective guise. He debases the predictions of another member, picking apart his short statement about subsidies. This action is intended to instil doubt in any of the following readers. RobertJ criticizes the prior contributors ability to make an argument and fills this doubtful gap with hyperbole; *what is not to like about Brexit?* The affective style is very powerful in this instance, creating a void of ignorance, promoting the disjointed logic that by not being able to *know* anything bad about Brexit, one must *know* Brexit is a good thing. By not being able to prove what might happen after Brexit, who is to say it is not a good thing? – certainly not those lying politicians....

“What do I expect in the coming months? Expensive political fluff which gets nowhere. I think we should all be prepared for a hard Brexit. I dont know where this will put farming - there have been assurances on our subsidy (or whatever it will be called) but all political promises are built of hot air. It will be a field day for the lawyers I am sure. But so long as people eat food I think all will be fine.”

Interview 8, Stationary^{bvi}

Scepticism and lack of faith in professionals is seemingly ubiquitous. Stationary, a Remain voting member, purveys the same disenchantment with established politics as those on the extreme Right of the forum. The current political system, here referring to that within the UK, is an expensive waste of time. It is noteworthy here that much of the anti-EU rhetoric is rooted in an encroachment of British democracy, yet the same wave of dissent slanders Britain’s own democratic system. Stationary’s final sentiment alludes to the confounding reason that has allowed the blind dismissal of all politics; an undergirding faith in free markets. Adrejevic writes:

‘The mistrust of regulation and the agents who would promulgate it goes hand-in-hand with a confirmed faith in that elusive (because fictive) ideal of the free market’ (2013: 138)

TFF members broadly dislike the intrusive hand of politicians and professionals who enforce regulation, seeing this as a means to inhibit their ability to do business in a ‘free market’. It is thought that economic mechanisms are the fairest adjudicator of success, a force which, if left to its own devices, will maintain and enact a status quo based on supply and demand. Behind the sensationalised fearmongering and scapegoating of both Remoaners and Brexiteers, the market takes on the role of objective arbiter, a reliable, apolitical constant. This ideal, as Adrejevic claims, is false. There is no omnipotent economy free of man’s intrusive hand, it is intrinsically a socially created system. Nor is there pre-EU equilibrium to which to return post Brexit. It is perceived that post-Brexit Britain will regain its imperial greatness, a suggestion on which I will comment in greater detail in the following section. Yet, members continue to pay homage to the economy, allowing it to justify their violence, their rejection of politics and their embrace of the unknown.

Stationary refers to this when he considers “everything will be okay as long as people keep eating” or, in other words, people keep buying food. While there is a market for their produce, farmers continue to have a reason to exist. The market becomes a buttress for their scepticism. This is intricately woven through much of TFF:

“the model for the environmental plan on each farm already exists, it is the farm's individual business plan... I think the market should dictate, end of story...”

Interview 1, Dragon^{lxvii}

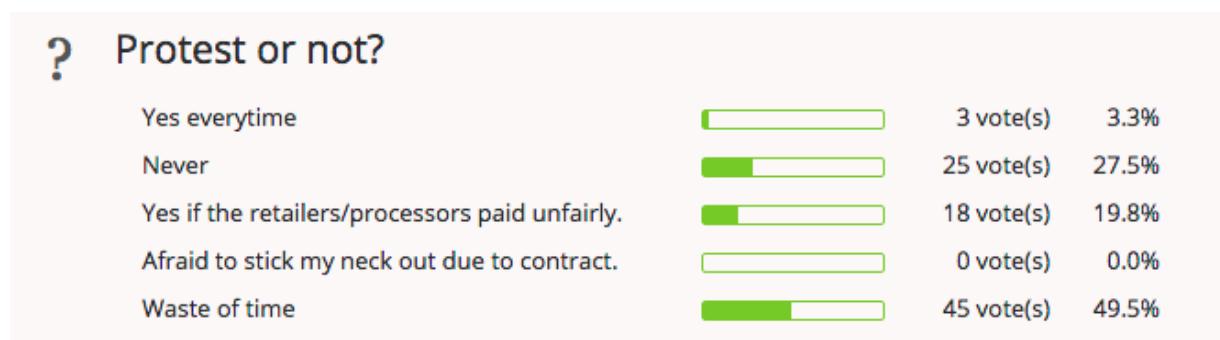
“No one on either side of the water is going to stop doing business because of some politics, they have a living to make as well as us.”

Thread on Sheep Farmers voting Leave, Mountainous^{lxviii}

Dragon’s comment exemplifies how very basic economics are treated as a powerful cognitive and convincing tool. This reduces a very complex issues to a simple equation of profit and loss. In an affective style, the statement can be passed off as an obvious truth, a product of simple common sense. Dragon asserts that the only regulation necessary to maintain good environmental practice is that of the farmers own business plan. He completely neglects any of the contextual issues, subsidy, use of inputs or upkeep of unproductive land on which the farmer currently relies. He simplifies the problem and finalizes by reaffirming his inability to change or engage in any meaningful way; ‘end of story’.

Mountainous takes up a fundamental and common thread of debate throughout the forum; politics being second to economics. The market, until recently, has been understood as a concern of politics (Boellstorff, 2015), not a stand-alone element but a tool for governmental bodies to manipulate for greater social wellbeing. In TFF, it seems, it is taken as a mediator of politics. This belief appears to be that the consequences of political affect, as mentioned in Chapter 3, do not exist beyond the safety net of international markets. The danger of Brexit is lost. There is no longer any need to consider the possible outcomes or the opinions of your peers if one is a zealot of the free market. The result is further division between the players. I have hinted at this division in previous chapters but this is best exemplified by the following debate outside of the Brexit subsection concentrating on protest at the fall in milk price:

Figure 2 **Poll on Whether or Not to Protest Falling Milk Price**



“Less = more. Farmers never learn.

Milk price has fallen 10%, "I need to produce 10% more milk now to get the same income!"

Thread on Milk Price Drop, SausageMuncher^{lxix}

“As has been said markets go up and down, production goes up and down, milk price goes up and down, it's the world we live in we just have to get used to it.”

Thread on Milk Price Drop, Gat Lamb^{bx}

Seen in Figure 2, 77% of voters in a poll questioned as to whether or not to protest a falling milk price decided it was either a ‘waste of time’ or it should ‘never’ be done. The collapsing milk price has had devastating ripple effects throughout the farming industry, leading to thousands of bankruptcies with survivors being forced to push production to monumental new heights to stay in business. Yet any political action to prevent this is considered ridiculous. The first of the two quotes seem to be commenting on the hopelessness of farmers, denying any fault from the individual farmer who is simply a pawn in floating nature of markets. There is no point doing or hoping for anything different because the sums are what they are and he simply has to get on with it.

This is a sentiment that I think runs through the Brexit debate; there is no hope for us as a collective and the EU is only propping up those that don’t deserve it. Those prolific posters who pushed support for Leave did not approach Brexit positively, with the best interests of their peers at heart. They may have looked at the industry as a whole but definitively through the lens of affect. It is as though no member considers that any other can farm effectively, particularly without the subsidies they rely on to remain in business. They seem to believe the current means of governance are keeping afloat those who should not be farming. While remaining an online community, the form of violent politics arising from exclusion of identity, extended by a climate of suspicion, has invaded the collective to result in such a strong rejection of the Other (who could be anyone), that the only solution to agricultural disparity is to reject all politics to the whims of the free market, the objective arbiter.

This is why there is not more of a concern for issues such as environmental stewardships, as these measures, while explicitly intrusive (personally and of the market) and unequal, encourage greater competition. The impact of this is unknown and cannot be operationalised based on the findings of this study, however, considering the outreach (27,000 plus members) and online poll of this forum (71% Leave) in combination with the actual Brexit result, it is reasonable to presume this has extended further than those few farmers I have mentioned in this thesis. What can be expected post-Brexit, as is exemplified by the second quote, is an even further synergy with the market and rejection of support; a complete refusal to engage politically, farmers will *‘just have to get used to it’*.

To act against the will of the market is seen as counter to this political rejection and this is how Brexit was conceived. Remain was perceived as the ‘political’ choice, the rational establishment vote based upon the good word of experts and leaders. Leave was the opposite; it sought to castrate politics, to reject its necessity in favour of a freedom in markets, that Britain might become a nation sovereign to this spectre of politicians and bureaucrats sucking the life blood out of the British economy. The Remain camp was shrouded in scepticism, hence the terms fearmongers, Re-moaners; their policies were that of fear for the unknown, hiding behind subsidies. Leave was the protest vote, it carried the affective charge described above, nurtured by this market safety-net. The Leave vote, therefore, was victim to and a proprietor of online populism. It is no surprise that of the three voting poles I had recorded during the months of research in TFF, they all had a greater than 70% margin.

4.2 Popular Revulsion

In the previous chapters I have made clear that, in my opinion, identity is fundamental to creating TFF community. I began by establishing that TFF is a community bounded by a perceived identity; the process by which human actors organise themselves socially and the basis for a broader ethic (Hirvonen & Pennanen, 2018b; Leve, 2011; Weedon, 2011). Members use language, among other tools, to emulate what they believe to be the TFF identity, widely agreed to be that of the 'British Farmer'. This situation becomes dangerous politically; members are often excluded because of their inability to represent said identity, they become unworthy of debate and a focus of anger.

Identity is controlled and manipulated by a stratified membership within the community. Those members who have posted and gained great popularity, receiving huge numbers of supporters over the last 6 years within the forum, are able to re-define the concept of 'British Farmer'. Using their influence, an inner circle of around fifty members will assert their dominance in order to silence argument against them, labelling any opposition as 'non-farmer' or 'troll'. This has the effect of commandeering the political arena and what is and what is not considered acceptable within.

This shifting identity, described by other authors as floating (Hirvonen & Pennanen, 2018) or liquid (Blü & Butzlaff, 2018), instilled with its affective charge, is what has allowed TFF to become a typology for all the literary symptoms of an arena of populists.

Jan-Werner Müller (2016: 72, 101) states that it is populists 'who break off the chain of claim making by asserting that the people can now be firmly and conclusively identified'. He posits that struggles to assert specific identities are akin to populism's efforts to address 'the people', to create a fictive idea that all those who appeal to the populist cause are of the same identity, bonded against a common enemy, in most instances 'the establishment' and those that support it. In effect, this smooths over ideological gaps, ignoring individual political agendas in favour of more superficial and trivial forms of commonality. In TFF this is both occupation and nationality. For the Leave campaign, however, the latter seems to have become the predominant indicator.

While 'the people' is not the term explicitly used within the forum, the same idea is carried by Brexiteers to tackle Remainers. By sidestepping verifiable truth for emotion, contributors to the forum overcome ideological boundaries and material limitations. The forum creates connections that secede previously held objections to create a non-discriminative collective. For example, a sound debate upon Brexit could be had between farmers of sheep (dependent on subsidies) and arable land (interested in a devalued pound to make British cereals a more attractive trading commodity). The two parties have a vested interest in having this debate with the prospect of achieving a valuable outcome. This does not occur in the political subsection of TFF, however, as rather than being divided by these material categories, they are absolved into the Remain-Leave dualism, where issues of the Brexit debate take precedence over all else.

"Put simply for 99% of UK residents see Brussels as a faceless monolith."

Interview 16, Mythical Antelope^{lxvi}

Mythical Antelope sweepingly and hyperbolically generalizes '99%' of the British population as conforming to his views on the EU parliament. He, as a firm Leave voter, believes that the EU is a threat to British culture and, therefore, any other member of the public purporting to be a patriot

must agree with him. If they do not agree, if they do not share his nationalistic view, he suggests in his thread, they are as good as foreign, unworthy of the brand 'UK resident' and his identity. He sees himself as the representative of 'the people', that his pro-Brexit sentiment speaks for his country and is the popular, accepted voice.

According to Hirvonen & Pennanen (2018: 8) "the people' is seen as pure, authentic, or representative of true interests of the general populace while 'the elite' is taken to be corrupt, inauthentic, or representative of a small minority composed of an economic and/or cultural elite.' In this sense, Mythical Antelope can promote his populist 'ideology' as he speaks for 'the people', whilst Brussels, suggested to be 'the elite', needs no more comment or description; the one word is taken as summing up the enemy. The elite are the enemy of all; they are continually suspect, beyond civility. Any attack on them is acceptable. A conflict emerges, akin to the Leave-Remain division laid out in the previous chapter.

In almost all literature concerning this phenomenon, populism is described as the rebellion of the 'people' against an 'elite'. In other words, it is the provocation of a common identity against an encroaching Other; the most commonly used term to describe this, both academically and in practice, is *sovereignty* (Andrejevic, 2013; Blü & Butzlaff, 2018; Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Nilsson & Carlsson, 2014; Kuldova, 2017). This concept is generally defined as the supreme ability of a governing body to espouse power over itself (O'Riordan & Jordan, 2018). This can take on many forms but typically within Brexit rhetoric it is used to describe the UK British monarchy and the sovereign state. Amongst TFF Brexiteers, however, it is manifested not as a clear vision of 'British' dominion but a rejection of all those who would impose themselves on the freedom of members. Namely, to regain sovereignty is to castrate the power of politicians and experts, to refer to something believed to be out of their meddling hands; the omnipotent free state and by extension, free market.

In light of this, the affective charge embedded in these terms is evident. As referred to earlier, within the Remain-Leave dualism, Brexiteers are accused of scapegoating all of their problems to be rooted in the EU and those that support it. The pursuit of sovereignty implies total liberation; a rejection of all the problems facing agriculture.

As Ben Krämer (2017: 263) writes, much in the style of arguments made above, 'populists adopt concepts and use them until they lose meaning'. As a product of post-truth politics, invested with affective desire for liberation in an idealized system, the true meaning of sovereignty has become convoluted, leading away from its original monarchical doctrine. In accordance, TFF members are free to create new meanings for themselves, although, the definitions of such are equally convoluted and trite:

"I voted to leave the EU and have no regrets; I regard the doom-saying as just that... we will have full national sovereignty again. That last point is why a huge number of people voted to leave, including many farmers, don't discount it in your research.... For a country that is above a 'critical mass', sovereignty is the remedy for everything, how can it not be?"

Entre, Dragon^{lxxii}

"Let each farm business run its affairs as it pleases."

Interview 4, PHD Nutter^{lxxiii}

"A totally integrated federal European state is the only aim and all national sovereignty will be removed."

Thread on Neutrality, Welding Tim^{lxxiv}

The first quote from Dragon sums up the sovereignty movement well. He begins by enforcing his strong sense of self and disregards any opposition. He proffers a particular definition of sovereignty, not economic or agricultural, but something more visceral to national politics. He refers to its importance, in typical populist fashion generalising it as the commonly held will. Dragon wants sovereignty, as do so many others, but he does not bother to define what that is. Sovereignty in modern Britain cannot be the idealised monarch as head of state but parliament; parliament makes laws akin to those of the EU. The argument, broadly across the Brexit debate was that laws/ regulation would be more acceptable if made by our own sovereign parliament, the inference being that they would be different and, because not defined, could be assumed to be whatever any individual desires. In fact, the laws/ regulation will be bound to be much the same; will the fact that they are then made by our sovereign parliament make them so much easier to swallow?

Despite this, sovereignty is enacted as an 'at all costs' (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), life or death (Hirvonen & Pennanen, 2018) struggle, a panacea against the ultimate fear. The language used here, 'no regrets / full / everything' reflects an individual totally dedicated to his cause. He creates an atmosphere around sovereignty so that it cannot be seen to falter or be criticized, and for that reason, as with free markets, it is beyond the reach of political debate. His final statement about critical mass is confusing, but completes this example; he considers that "the people" firmly rely on sovereignty to make good. Of *what* is just as unclear!

PHD Nutter considers that he strives for individual sovereignty from economic sanctions in his support of the free economy. Instead of national sovereignty, he seems to ask for a breakdown of the nation state entirely, to allow farmers to work autonomously in direct contact with the market.

It appears that Leave supporters on TFF are concerned that the UK is becoming more integrated into Europe and losing their 'British' identity so closely associated with national sovereignty. As a consequence, Remain, the defenders of the EU, become the 'elite', the reviled Other that threatens their sovereignty and livelihood. In the same vein as the WW2 reference made by Boris Johnson in Chapter 3, Welding Tim sees Europe as an aggressive force that seeks to undermine the UK, stripping 'us' of 'our' sovereignty. The term can evidently be used for multiple conceptions, notably as national, parliamentary, economic or individual sovereignty, redefined to suit the given anti-Remain argument.

It appears that the term 'sovereignty' is used quite liberally to invoke a provocative sentiment without great consideration for its root definition. Tom Boellstorff (2015) goes as far to call the internet era the age of 'techne' as opposed to 'episteme', of creation rather than knowledge. In this epoch, the importance of knowledge is no longer a precursor for political prowess but instead the ability to artistically create an environment of political significance. More commonly known as *prosumption*, information is both consumed and 'co-created' by its protagonists (Boellstorff, 2015; Büscher, 2016). Nilsson & Carlsson (2014) in their research on populist figureheads in Sweden found that within digital populist identities, political content was no longer important, replaced by 'practices of attention seeking and personal branding'. The result, as mentioned many times previously, is the process of members such as of Angry Midget shifting and manipulating the 'Other' in symmetry with the 'self'; redefining identity to create a situation that is both politically volatile and favourable to them.

"I'm appalled. Many cultures throughout the world would quite happily destroy the UK. Those who follow Islam and have practiced slavery for 1,000s of years would see nothing wrong in

enslaving non followers... There is nothing wrong with CAP in principle, however it has been corrupted by those who want money for their own ends. When you have corporations buying up peices of Africa the size of Belgium ... the very idea there will be a level playing field is naive.

Grow up !"

Thread on Protectionism, Angry Midget^{bxxv}

In the quote above, Angry Midget invokes at least six different 'Others' to make his point; other cultures, muslims, the CAP, EU administrators, selfish farmers and the established corporate elite. In this short paragraph he manages to paint an extremely claustrophobic environment, with enemies encroaching from all sides. Angry Midget tightens the definition of TFF member identity by proclaiming that in order to be 'us', one must conform to the idea that the given statements are the 'Other' (Nilsson & Carlsson, 2014). His questionable statements are apparently approved, however, since, as mentioned earlier, Angry Midget is among the highest ranking members in terms of 'likes' and 'shares'. Using his influence, he is able to throw questionable truths at the forum, bending the facts to conform to his version of the case at hand.

I posit that this is the defining phenomenon of Brexit in TFF. The pull of populism and the idyll sovreignty has often been described as 'manifestations of those disadvantaged by the system taking back control'. In other words, those feeling oppressed by the EU are asserting identity to regain their sovereignty (Marchlewska, Cichocka, Panayiotou, Castellanos, & Batayneh, 2018: 159). Finlayson (2017) writes that identity is the goal of Brexiteers as it 'has given...["the people"]...political goals and a sense not only of where they have come from but also of how they might continue into the future'. As I have shown in the previous section, however, a ubiquitous belief in the free market to act as safety net to any and all political misdoings has made the need to determine a future obsolete. In actuality, uncertainty and ignorance has become a valid reason for political (in)action.

Identity as a means to define, know and control the future may seemingly be the motivation for many of populism's sheep, however, I do not find this as satisfactory evidence for the broad rejection of politics seen throughout this thesis. It does not provide any productive suggestion for the future of farming, stating the Leave campaign was simply rooted in irrational, insatiable desire instead of any political antagonism. Rather, I wish to argue that while populism may appear to be a force to regain political supremacy for 'the people', within TFF the result is something far more sinister and calculated. I suggest that those core members I have often described, shown in the example of Angry Midget above, manipulate the forum analogous to populist demagogues. Their efforts result in creating an insular form of politics, focused on their own prominence within the online space, remaining ignorant to the salience of topics they employ. In turn, they are enforcing an antipolitical agenda, leading to greater exclusion of identity and alienating more members from engaging in the debate. As a result, the Leave campaign prevailed simply because Remain was perceived as the political vote. Those members excluded from the debate, still embroiled by affect, supported Leave by default, seeking a destruction of politics despite ironically being aligned with the side that excluded them.

TFF members, therefore, are not engaging in this form of Far-Right populism as a means to control an identity, rather, they indulge in the affective game of identity politics as a means to establish their position within the community. Whilst this can be conceived as a very political antagonism within the hierarchy of TFF's core members, it pays no contribution to offline politics. Members will often enter debate with good intentions, yielding solid information and challenging insight, but this all too often descends when these arguments threaten the existing social hierarchy. Once this happens, the highly affective nature of this forum depoliticizes the salience

of the offline politics, turning predominantly to provocative yet fictive notions of free market liberation and sovereignty, pursuing these seductive, insatiable goals as a means of progressing one's own standing within the community. As such, it seems core members believe they are in fact in control of said 'online' identity and this is what limits actual political discussion. Akin to figures like Nigel Farage and Donald Trump, TFF inner circle members manipulate identity to create emotionally charged environments, to foster support and silence the possibility of a reasoned analysis.

Marchlewska et al. (2018) describes, rather than unifying people to make their nation great, it is more plausible that sovereignty dynamics would further foster intergroup division. This is certainly apparent in the broader community of TFF as a result of this violent and sensationalized arena. It seems that for those not taken up in Far-Right rhetoric, for example, Remainers, sovereignty is a somewhat confusing issue. The fluid definition of such makes it a very difficult assertion to counter. Considering that approaching the wrong definition in arguments of this nature would most likely result in an even more affective rebuttal, presenting a risk to an actors' online identity, it is widely avoided as a topic of discussion. In interviews many Remainers were aware of sovereignty's irrational grounding and the futility in debating it.

I have described earlier how those engaged the Brexit subsection fall into the political dualism of Remain/Leave and how, due to the nature of affective politics, it is very difficult to remain peripheral, even as an ethnographer. The following two examples show how this violent form of politics acts to dissuade prospective contributors, even leading them to an active and equally violent rejection.

"I haven't spent much time in the politics section as it's not something that appeals to me particularly and it seems to bring out the worst in people.. I chose not to discuss brexit on the forum as a rule just through choice"

Interview 11, Legless Sheep^{lxvii}

"Sun will shine. Rain will fall. Grass will grow and I'll still be a lad with a few chickens. Hope that is of some help. I reckon proper farmers will be along shortly."

Entre, Pie^{lxviii}

Legless Sheep is a young member who generally does not engage in the Brexit subsection, despite being fairly prolific in other areas of the forum. He is subdued because of the quality of debate therein. I have referred to the exclusory and depoliticizing forces of online debate throughout this thesis, and this is a direct comment from a participant on the way in which he has been alienated from politics. Rather than bringing about a call to arms, the method of debate seems to be driving a greater wedge between TFF members. Legless Sheep actively self-censors so as not to become involved in the affective turmoil of Brexit discussions, negating the possibility of his participation in a political discussion.

The second quote above is the first piece of evidence that I recorded in this ethnography. At the time, I did not recognise the importance of the statement, considering it to be my first run-in with trolling. I had not expected to be discussing it in my closing arguments, but this has proven to be one of the consistent themes within TFF. When asked what he expects from Brexit, Pie refers rather helplessly to his constants, those things beyond the common conception of political control, which are common and well understood within the farming community, namely, the weather. He simplifies the issue, much in the same way as populists I have mentioned earlier do, but with the intention of rejecting the debate rather than inciting it. It reflects someone who has

been overcome by the violence and can see no end in sight. Instead he would prefer an upheaval of the entire argument, to return to what an agricultural forum should be concerned with, chickens and the weather.

Following this, strikingly, he proffers some sympathy for my position. This could easily be taken as a sarcastic tone but judging by the rest of his statement, I would not agree. His offer of help seems to be something of a warning; to signal the fruitlessness beneath the stone I am about to turn. He is attempting to expend his experience within the forum and the apparently endless, affective friction.

The final statement is his most powerful. He explicitly denies his position as a farmer. He makes an extra effort not to generalise himself as such, rather simply 'a lad with some chickens'. It is characteristic of much of the debate I have described above but in reverse, acknowledging his own impotence to change the course of the future or to embody such an identity, preferring to deny his farmer identity altogether. The last statement, 'proper farmers will be along shortly', I do see as sarcastic, forwardly mocking those other members who might think they know better, striving to define themselves as proper 'British Farmers'.

Rather than taking back control of the political voice, then, these quotes are evidence of a rebuttal of both the politics and the identity it pushes. The pervasiveness of this is evident in the refusal of identity shown in Chapter 2, in which members will state 'I am not a real farmer' before attempting to make a reasoned argument. There is even a prominent Remain supporter who calls himself 'Ex-Farmer'⁹, seemingly shedding his identity so as not to be thrown in with those who embody populist rhetoric.

So, while the endeavour for sovereignty may be painted as a pursuit to control a common identity, in actuality it has the effect of deterring those who would be prime candidates from wishing to partake. In the process of which, it turns them away from all other forms of political discussion. The climate around Brexit, the violent exchange of affect, is seen to be the only method of 'doing politics'. The highly affective sovereignty debate, pushing forward without any definitive grounding or a hint of slowing down, has forced many observers to confront their own inability to stop it. Therefore, members largely prefer to reject politics all together for perceived constant, apolitical forces; the free market. Unfortunately, however, this aligns those against the entire performance more closely with the Leave campaign.

In the case of Pie, it seems that many of those estranged from the movement are not 'disaffected' from affect. They actively reject the political motivation and join the ranks of the mere sceptics, as made evident in the previous section regarding safety in markets. Whilst there is a clear difference between a Brexiteer, the chivalrous buccaneer pushing for the rights of 'British Farmer', and the non-partisan, they share a common vision. They both seek to castrate politics, the first to dismember the power of the elite and the latter to silence politics all together.

Therefore, it is not populism, the sovereignty movement and the wish to 'take back control' of identity that has directly caused support for Brexit in TFF. Both Leave and Remain have seemingly been guilty of employing highly emotive and ostensibly populist provocations of identity that has led to an insular form of 'online' politics. Rather, it is a combination of these forces, pushing a widespread distaste for politics. This is evident in the result of the pole as mentioned earlier, 71% Leave to 29% Remain, but of the of 22,960 views, only 696 members who chose to vote.

It appears that populism is an extremely powerful political ideology, allowing Leave to adopt this *sovereignty* rhetoric, playing to the identity politics that pre-existed Brexit within TFF.

⁹ Actual Alias

Judging by the numbers outlined above, however, I believe the most significant indicator of how Brexit was allowed to occur was by how many were de-politicized and disengaged by this violent performance. Remain, painted as the political elite, became the common enemy, not necessarily by populist assertion, but by attempting to engage with Leave.

Remain, with such a poorly defined identity to be involved in a post-truth political arena, purveying themselves as the voice of reason in the void of ignorance that was Brexit, were to shoot themselves in the foot politically. The Brexiteers were able to capitalise on this, showing Remain to be in favour politics and the violence that it created within the forum. Remain were seen as the antagonists, debasing this space reserved for civilised farm 'chat' to acerbic name calling. Meanwhile, Leave deemed themselves the heroes, championing promises of salvation. Whilst the actions of the Leave campaign seemingly did not work for the majority of TFF participants, the failure of Remain to show themselves as anything other than superior and condescending did. Leave became the obvious choice to those just wanting to see an end to the conflict, however, there is still no end in sight.

Finally, to answer the question 'we're out so WTF do we do now?' is not possible or desirable within TFF. I consider this more an affective invitation to 'play' politics than a genuine will to find an answer. Following Hirvonen & Pennanen, (2018: 9) it seems 'democratic ideology centred on the notion of the sovereign people generates expectations that are inevitably disappointed'. The extreme level of populist assertion, painting these fictive notions of sovereignty, free market and identity as possible achievements, has negated the possibility of producing a progressive politics from TFF. In a post-truth platform, in which these notions can be, first, asserted to be true without criticism and, second, supported with such a high level of affective investment, displaces the foundation for establishing politics, or as Mouffe (1993) describes, 'a sense of social order and organization'.

As a subject of debate, Brexit has become extremely potent, driving change within the forum, creating a new subsection and increasing the support of certain members. Within the online, perhaps it can be considered that this serves a political cause in re-organizing TFF power structures, but the offline politics has been lost to emotion. The EU Referendum offered an opportunity for the membership to create and embody the 'British Farmer' position and sentiment, which proved enthralling within the forum. The prevailing violent, affective identity politics that determines and maintains the TFF social loafer community and its core members acts as the antithesis to using this forum as a productive means of garnering a post-Brexit agricultural policy.

4.3 Online Reflections

This thesis is focused on how actors form and coalesce politically in online environments. While it purports to address British farmers, their relationship with the EU and the impending Brexit, thus far my conclusions broadly concern how this is mediated by TFF as a space for political discourse. This embodies a revolutionary shift in the world of social sciences. Social media has provoked fundamental new questions, both methodological and to the field of political study more generally.

Twenty years ago, a study of this nature could not have been conceived. The technologies that have facilitated this entirely new political arena only existed in very small pockets of the educated and/or rich. I have attempted to show that now, even amongst the most traditionalists,

white men that work full time in rural areas aged fifty or above, are utilising these means to engage in a variety of interesting social practices.

Equally, within those twenty years these tools have undergone unprecedented growth, both technologically and in terms of accessibility. In this period we have seen their use explode, leading from the first 'Personal Computers' to hand held devices that allow 24 hour-a-day, 7 days-a-week access to a seemingly infinite pool of information. Furthermore, this is predicted to increase vastly, as mentioned earlier, the number of UK farmers using forms of social media will exceed 90% by 2023 (SF 2017). The 27000 active TFF members (5.8% of UK workforce), the number of actors included in this study sample, which in the scheme of social sciences would have been an unsurmountable research population for a thesis such as this until recently, will soon become an insignificant number of early adopters.

Finally, the means of analysing such populations have undergone much specification but are still only in their early stages of development. For example, the field of sentiment analysis and software such as Atlas.ti, as used in this thesis, may have recently become accessible and practiced within broader social sciences, but their practicality and efficacy are still highly disputed. The more elusive, algorithmically focused disciplines of big data analysis, which have been proven to have altered the outcome of multiple political campaigns, are provoking wide controversy. Undoubtedly, research into the relationship between society and the internet is a novel topic and will become increasingly dominant within political study.

In Chapter 2, I concluded that throughout this era of emerging technologies, TFF has evolved profoundly. I showed that in its short history, it has become a politically active community, strong enough to shape and govern its environment. I later argue that this is partly to blame for the displacement of offline political importance, however, there are further unexpected outcomes to the mechanism that ostensibly created an egalitarian, uncensored, farmer-owned forum. Surprisingly, the development of online space has produced social hierarchies akin to offline social life. The combination of affective labour and a shared conception of identity seem to pursue a system devised of likes, shares and therefore, algorithmic popularity.

It is interesting that while the online has developed new forms of (not) doing politics, it still seems to construct social structures of power; a stratified hierarchy similar to a class system or monetary system that is rooted in accumulating social and affective capital. What makes these forms of capital different, however, is they cannot be lost; 'likes' and 'shares' are archived, so while a member may fall out of popularity and a new may gain greater favour, the symbols of his once held prowess remain intact.

The claims of reproducing power structures are great, and certainly merit much greater study, but I believe this is an integral reason for the Brexit bias in TFF. In pursuing this study I had hoped to find new forms of reading political antagonisms, to find out why farmers would vote for Brexit. As I have theorised in the previous section, however, this seems to have occurred due to a reactionary pursuit and preservation of power rather than a progressive vision. As argued by Krämer (2017) in the Introduction, populism tends to assist the existing mechanisms of power by inviting actors to identify with their politics rather than encouraging political discourse. My findings in TFF support these claims; the overwhelming affective language that prevents reasoned debate suggest that the ability to "chew the fat" on the internet is causing a 'dumbing down' of political debate and politics in general.

The rise of technology and social platforms has brought about multiple new political phenomena. Many of great interest have escaped total substantiation within the scope of this study but have contributed to this conception of politics nonetheless. An early sign was how members would often debate as though google was open in their browser alongside the forum

site. They would appear to put quotes directly from multiple websites in a single post. These statements would lack coherency and clarity but would be tailored toward a desired message. The access to this vast source then restricts their need to truly digest information, rather it just requires the ability to search the right trigger words into a search engine. The same capability is all that is required to make a response.

Anonymity has allowed actors to put forward and perform political positions and roles far more liberally than would have perhaps been conceivable before. TFF members embody this in varying degrees, for example, Cinderbush and Angry midget both profess extremes, Left and Right. Both of them use no profile picture, have a page that is locked to a selective few viewers and cannot be contacted via private message. They are comfortable spouting their political positions as there can be no repercussions as long as no one discovers their true identities.

In other cases, members may use this sense of anonymity to create wholly fictitious profiles. The internet has provided anyone the ability to create an online personality outside of one's own, to live out a role that can be a complete creation or fantasy with great ease. While these kind of performances may have existed before, this new era facilitates it both in a sense that it is both normal and acceptable to be lying and there is very little chance of being caught. What emerges is a shared and cautious respect for online identities, particularly within the field of study. As such, members may enjoy playing Troll or living out other roles in the social makeup aside from their own (Mooney 2015).

Immediacy of response and constant availability have proven integral. A member once described how he had received the news until he became engaged in the internet. He would receive a newspaper every morning, which would somewhat objectively review the latest news. He would then wait 24 hours for the next day's paper to think and formulate an opinion before seeing the political response. Today, news is provided largely by corporate sources, sometimes sensationalised, much as was done before, however, now the response opinion must be immediate. For members within TFF, the sooner after a news event occurs and an opinion is voiced the more likely that member is to be able to manipulate said event in his favour. Fortunately for the Leave campaign, they have a solid set of principles to fall back on, as established at the end of Chapter 3; immigration, civil service and subsidy as intrinsically bad, deregulation, sovereignty and accountability as good. These emotionally invested positions allow for quick responses without the need for thought or reflection.

These attributes combine to form a post-truth environment; an overtly emotional form of argument with an uneasy scepticism of the Other. This is met with with a huge volume of information attempting to fill that void of doubt and fear at great speed. This has two fundamental results in TFF. First it deters members from contributing other than through likes and shares and, second, it floods their ability to critically adjudicate, falling to emotional sentiment. It has realised a form of politics that is more concerned with the 'game' than the issues it discusses.

There are now vast populations which are highly vulnerable to manipulative forms of politics. Actors and groups well versed in the culture of 'prosumption' can have a wide influence when addressing certain communities. Prior to the internet, this simply was not available. The salience of this is only now coming to the fore as infamous tech firm Cambridge Analytica is forced to reveal its individualised Brexit campaign advertisements, wildly claiming the invasion of Turkish migrant workers (Cadwalladar & Townsend, 2018).

As I have done to an extent within this study, it is quite simple to capture the sentiment surrounding political camps that are responsive to emotive manipulation, as shown by the Leave campaign's token responses. These views are expressed publicly, for all to see; both those held by certain members and their associated supporters. This becomes an invaluable resource, not only

for those within the immediate social realm looking to improve their distinction, but to data mining¹⁰, actors seeking to tailor their own / employers' political agenda. Therefore, while I have argued that TFF politics are played out independently of offline politics, it is noteworthy that the manipulation by core members is reflected in the emerging use of 'big data' campaigning, which suggests an even greater, legitimized culture of post-truth and anti-politics (Finlayson, 2017).

In light of this I have been careful not to simply 'cherry-pick' data, based on what certain members have said. Rather, with the help of coding software, I have attempted to draw out trends within TFF. In order to avoid over generalization, I have explicitly addressed multiple factors and characteristics of those members I observed. I discussed farming backgrounds, interests, family and age among other possible political influences. The prevailing dualism which I encountered in TFF, however, seemed to take precedence over all other factors.

As such, drawing from these arguments made above, I posit there is demand for research in different ways of reading the *political*. As shown by the use of Big data analysis, the current forefront of research is bent on creating predictable electoral outcomes. Rather than facilitating greater political mobilization, online connection has introduced mass electoral corruption. It seems those exploring politics and social media academically are focused on financial gain and not for the benefit of society and democracy. Furthermore, in attempting to seek out an unadulterated antagonism, I was only able to trail populist rhetoric born of this kind of manipulation. I found evidence of post-truth politics so deeply riven within both sides of Remain/Leave dualism that I was unable to substantiate anything further than a widespread rejection of politics. Therefore, I believe it is the position of those on the left, with a vested interest in preserving the relevance of epistemic exploration, to address possible alternatives.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

Rather than being actively enabled through affective connections, TFF is incapable of working as a political collective, acting on the whim of populist manipulation and/or the rejection of said politics to market mechanisms. Free market zeal has made palatable a future without known structure allowing emotive populist sentiment to reign supreme. The forum is political, but only superficially because of politics. It is preoccupied by insular politics of identity and affect that drives debate and the changing fortunes of power within the forum itself, but in so doing negates the possibility for any genuine well-reasoned debate on the topics they employ.

It may appear to be a process of taking back control and a cry for freedom but the actual outcome is a rejection of what I would consider truly 'political' viewpoints, for a reliance on that which is considered apolitical, reducing the processes of discussion to a means of entertainment and 'play', ostensibly perceived without any actual, offline consequences. The dissonant voices within the forum cannot produce a coherent argument between them with which to engage a common enemy, even if they were able to agree on who or what that enemy might be. As a result, the Leave campaign prevailed within the forum due to its pro-market, anti-establishment rhetoric in combination with Remains disdainful support for politics.

Under these social mechanisms, the outlook for post-Brexit governance and the potentiality for online democracy seem bleak from a TFF point of view as legislators have little chance of pleasing TFF or gaging a consistent policy from the populist message.

¹⁰The process of collecting, searching through, and analyzing a large amount of data as to discover patterns or relationships.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusions

How does thefarmingforum.co.uk reveal British farmers' political standing with regard to the Brexit debate and what are the strategies and motivations of said farmers for post-EU agricultural governance?

This thesis set out to investigate the political motivations for and against Brexit within thefarmingforum.co.uk. My conclusion is that, based on this small study group, there was surprisingly little real democratic discussion behind the high level of seemingly irrational support from British farmers for the Leave campaign. In providing insight in to some of the influences on and of the debate, my study is able to suggest a dualism, Remain-Leave, that overrode the factual arguments, bolstered by a belief in the free market as a post EU strategy for the British Agricultural industry. The Brexiteers are able to blow hot air because they have faith in the power of the free market economy; Remain voters can allow themselves to be absent from debate as they too, in the main within TFF, have a fundamental belief in the safety net that they perceive the free market to offer.

This political performance exactly typifies populism, as defined by various writers set out in the study. My view is that populism is an inherently dangerous form of politics leading as it does to disappointment when overblown hyperbole may not manifest into reality. The online world of TFF demonstrates a populism in which identity and affect dominate without relation to the offline world. The debate appears to be a 'game' of politics rather than a praxis for democracy. The prevailing Brexiteers can behave as they do because of their strictly anti-establishment rhetoric, which attracts both members with an anti-EU agenda and those estranged from the relentless, violent "pissing-contest".

Whilst my study is localised to one single forum, and I would not purport to comment on the entire phenomenon which is Brexitism, I certainly recognise some of the debate in the broader national media and other studies of Brexit. The method of debate shows parallels with other such discussion fora studied in existing literature on online populism.

My submission, then, is that the traditional mode of reading politics is insufficient to evaluate the political in TFF. Whitfield & Marshall (2017) study the technical arguments within the Brexit debate and its possible outcomes but, by not considering that their sample might be expressing politics symptomatic of post-truth, I posit that they do not conceptualise the "more British" model of agricultural policy that they promote. In a climate of post-truth, where it is possible to "cherry-pick" arguments to lead to any pre-conceived conclusion, to overlook this political element might achieve unsatisfactory results.

If post-truth is the 'inevitable outcome of epistemic democracy' (Fuller, 2016), then it is for academics to embrace this and to find new ways of studying, interpreting and doing *politics*. Post truth is born of an egalitarian approach to politically enabling technologies. Akin to the invention of the printing press in 1440, the internet has revolutionised access of information to the masses. The duty of the academic should, therefore, be to invest study into more practical applications of theory such as affect and the effect of this on established politics.

Moving forward, these tools of reading politics should be taken account of by those exercising legislative power such that, when formulating policy, an effort could be made to

infiltrate the antagonisms possibly within post-truth, in turn to create new ways of “doing politics” beginning a shift back to reasoned debate.

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