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Stéphane Revillet

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The Left-Behind: People, Places and Policy in 21st Century UK

Friday 10 November 2023

Maison de la recherche – Université Sorbonne Nouvelle (CREW) – Paris 3

Stéphane REVILLET (Université de Bourgogne, TIL): **The definitional genealogy of the term “the left behind” from David Cameron to Rishi Sunak during PMQs**

INTRO

Although the term “the left-behind” is not a new one, it became a distinctive sign of the Conservative government during the Johnson years; together with “levelling up” these terms became the brand of Boris Johnson’s policies. During PMQs, the PM was asked to account for and explain these policies aimed at helping “the left behind”. It could have rightly been expected that these weekly sessions would have given the PM the opportunity to provide an accurate definition of the concept of the left-behind, but the very nature of this term (and of the PMQs) defeats any such definitional attempts. Addressing and targeting people grouped together in a poorly defined category is not innovative in itself. David Cameron, Theresa May and Rishi Sunak have also used PMQs to address specific segments of the population while advertising policies designed to alleviate their plight. My contention is that there is a semantic lineage between those groups (of people), and the study of the genealogy of these group terms might contribute to delineate the definitional substance of the left-behind and also to analyse the purpose of using these terms as mantras during PMQs.

First, let us examine the basic definitional elements provided by each of the 5 Cons PMs as regards the categories of people they targeted during the PMQ debates.

1. The Five PM’s own interpretation of those who have been left behind but the same category of people

Boris Johnson

→ B Johnson never uses the left behind in reference to people or organisations

Instead, the term is generally used in reference to places across the UK

Examples -→ “invest in places that for decades were left behind” (20/07/2022) + “rural areas” (15/09/2021) + Stoke-on-Trent (21/10/2020) + the Midlands (30/09/2020) + Ashfield and Eastwood, Nottinghamshire + Bridgend (05/02/2020)

The emphasis on places rather than on people and communities is to be understood in the context of the implementation of the levelling up policies mainly in reference to the need of investment in those places. The effort of the gvt lies in the necessity to bridge the gap (whatever the gap is) between regions in the UK. The way the term “Left-behind” is used here reflects an eco-geographical approach rather than a social one (even if the 2 intersect). In this corpus, B Johnson would rather address the people through their identification with a region rather than through an identified social background.

And this is different from his predecessors and successors who favour references to groups of people from a specific social background → hard-working people or the JAMs (the ordinary working families).

David Cameron

The group of people D. Cameron specifically and intensively targets during PMQs is “the hard-working” people/families.

Unlike the left-behind, the hard-working families primarily refers to people and not so much to places.

Who are these people? → first and foremost they are families (underscoring family values).

But more broadly -→ the target : the people / those who work hard.

The gvt’s effort to help people “with childcare”, or “to meet their budgets and meet their needs” ‘or with their pension” seems limited by conditions on eligibility for such gvt assistance: namely, being in work. Cameron clearly establishes some sort of means-tests making work the only criteria (qualification) to be eligible, re-igniting the notion of the deserving poor¹ and claiming that the “best route out of poverty is work”. Those who deserve help = workers (strivers) and those who don’t (shirkers living off benefits)

Basically, D Cameron’s “hard-working people” category is predominantly class-based, he unambiguously targets the working class who feel they have been left behind.

Theresa May

There is continuity with D. Cameron = the “hard-working families”, who need help, become “ordinary working families” and the best route out of poverty is work.

Over the course of her premiership, the ordinary working families merge with the “Just About Managing” (JAMs). => those who “struggle to make ends meet”, who “find life is a struggle”, who “are barely coping at all, who “are struggling to get by”, who “work to provide for themselves”...

Her concern lies with the economic situation of the JAMs rather than the geographically disadvantaged places (although concerns for the Black country pervade her speeches).

Interestingly, T May “believes in levelling up”, she wants “to raise people up” heralding Boris Johnson’s plan to level up the country geographically, socially, culturally and economically. The “left behind” can be construed as the synthetic combination of David Cameron and T May’s categories of people in need of assistance (address to). We can see the conceptual thread (of the left-behind) running through the conservative years.

Rishi Sunak

With Rishi Sunak, “the left-behind” are now referred to as “the most vulnerable”. R Sunak’s idiom places a premium on people rather than places: they are “the most vulnerable in our society”, “the most vulnerable families/children/constituents”...

¹ La *Poor Law* de 1834 faisait la distinction entre les pauvres méritants et les pauvres non-méritants. La première catégorie comprenait ceux qui, pour des raisons indépendantes de leur volonté (comme le handicap, la vieillesse, la maladie) ne pouvaient pas subvenir à leurs propres besoins. La seconde catégorie regroupait ceux qui étaient sans emploi et qui étaient considérés comme des « bons à rien », des « tire-au-flanc » qui représentaient un fardeau pour leur communauté et qui méritaient le plus sévère des traitements. Editorial, [Malcolm Golightley](#), [Margaret Holloway](#), *The British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 46, Issue 1, January 2016, Pages 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw001>

Rishi Sunak's phrase is an overt echo to Cameron's rhetoric →the use of the term "the most vulnerable" is embedded in a speech reminiscent of David Cameron's terminology, laying emphasis on a gvt and a party which are "fair" and "compassionate", and which "will support hard-working nurses" and "the most vulnerable".

Moreover, the superlative "the most", while being an linguistic instrument for dramatization, is indicative of a limit to the gvt's assistance, some kind of requirements to be met to be granted gvt's help (i.e., the "just" vulnerable are not worthy of gvt's assistance) = indication that a specific level of vulnerability is required

There is no denying that "the most vulnerable" is the avatar of the hard-working, the left behind or the JAMs. The genealogy of the term proves that "the left-behind" is a link in a semantic chain forming one single concept. My contention is that these terms (The hard-working people, The Jams, the Left-behind, the most vulnerable) represent one single category bearing different names.

One can wonder how one single category of people can refer to different people at different times / periods of time. In order to answer this question, one needs to turn to the concept of reference groups.

2. Reference groups as symbols

First, these terms, like the left behind (JAMs, The most vulnerable...) refer to people who are reified into categories. Several linguistic tools are resorted to to objectify people into categories : (The+noun, acronyms...)

Moreover and more significantly, those categories are loosely defined. All these terms possess a low definitional level with a common characteristic: being disadvantaged (in one way or another).

As the level of characterisation of these reference groups is purposely kept as low as possible, a wide variety of people and places can be included in these groups. These are what Murray Edelman calls **reference groups**.

Even the residents of the wealthiest parts of the UK also feel they "have been left-behind", for instance due to poor broadband connection in the Cotswolds. The socio-economic situations of the areas of the North are placed on par with the concerns of the wealthiest parts of the country through the evocation of the "the left-behind".

"The left-behind" are not to be found in the UK only. "*Female prosecutors and female judges in Afghanistan*"² are categorised as left-behind ("*Those left behind are in mortal danger*"). The references to the most vulnerable extends to those living in "*Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan or elsewhere*"³ and eventually to the whole world because according to R. Sunak "*compassion must be targeted at the world's most vulnerable*"⁴.

For Cameron, hard-working people deserving gvt assistance include companies and businesses in need of investments and money⁵. Theresa May places the JAMs from the public sector and the private sector on an equal footing.

From that perspective, "life has become a struggle" for virtually everyone everywhere. "The left behind" is used as an abstract archetypal category of people taking the reality to a symbolic level. In short, the reference groups have become symbols (see The political uses of symbols, p. 54).

² 15/03/2023, vol. 729, col. 829

³ 03/05/2023,

⁴ 08/03/2023, vol. 729, col. 298-99

⁵ 23/10/2013, vol. 569, col. 298.

Interestingly, Daniel Crowe of *The All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods* points out that the term

“left-behind, while being contentious, is shorthand for those economically disadvantaged areas overlooked or ignored by policymakers and investors and, can also mean different things to different people⁶”

Knowingly or unknowingly, he gives the definition of a symbol. He refers here to one of the main features of symbols = their **multivocality** → the same symbol may be understood by different people in different ways (Kertzer)

2 other major characteristics of symbols which apply to these reference groups are worth mentioning: (Edelman and Saphir) = they possess **ambiguous** referents and are heavily laden with **emotive content** (condensation symbols) → The term :“The most vulnerable” stirs more emotions than C1, C2 or DE categories (according to the Social Grade classification⁷)

The more ambiguous the term, the more potent (Kertzer p11)=→ In that respect, “the left-behind” is the most ambiguous term of the 4 or 5 identified above, because it encompasses places as well as people and can apply to all categories of people in many different situations (not necessarily in need of economic assistance). There is no mention of specific ways of measuring the level of socio-economic deprivation, for example, through indexes⁸ or through social class denominations (“the lower middle class” or “the working class”) or even through benefits limits below which one is “most vulnerable”.

The reference groups (above) are symbols and as such any accurate definition of the targeted groups is carefully avoided. The aim for the gvt is to mention archetypal reference groups in association with the evocation of beliefs about the problems, the intentions, or the moral condition of people whose very existence is problematic, but who become the benchmarks by which real people shape their political beliefs and perceptions.

Transition: I said it was the aim of the gvt to change reality and to create a world in which people become archetypal groups, but one may wonder why, to what end, for what purpose?

3. Reference groups as mythical populations

As mentioned earlier, almost everyone can identify with these reference groups which function as symbols. Murray Edelman identifies these groups as mythical populations.

The function of the mythical population is the evocation of a reference group other than the plainly visible and identified segment of the population. “The left-behind”, “the most vulnerable”, “the JAMs” ... are left with no voice to be heard, they are not visible as they have generally been “ignored and forgotten”. All the statements about unobservable people are often either impossible to verify or quite clearly invalid. What’s more, as virtually everyone can recognize themselves in these reference groups, they are said to be the “many, not the few” (T May and David Cameron), implying this population represents the majority of the country. A majority that cannot be observed or identified accurately because it has been “left-behind” with no voice is ideal for political and partisan purposes.

⁶ (20 February 2023, ‘Left behind’ neighbourhoods and the Big Local story)

⁷ Social Grade is a socio-economic classification. This is a way of grouping people by type, which is mainly based on their social and financial situation

⁸ For example CNI : quantitative measure of left behind neighbourhoods. As part of this, we developed a Community Needs Index, the first composite indicator of its kind, looking at the social and cultural factors that can contribute to poorer life outcomes.
Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)

3.1. A mythologised political world

Myths are devices aimed at “simplifying and giving meaning to complex sets of observations that evoke concern. People who are anxious and confused are eager to be supplied with an organized political order and with the reassurance that the threats are being countered” (p65, Politics as Symbolic Action, M Edelman).

->The world of myths is simple: it revolves around hostile plotters, and benevolent hero-leaders and of course victims.

The mythical populations whether they are “the left-behind” or the others mentioned earlier, are useful as archetypal victims. The sheer acknowledgement of their existence is enough to turn them into victims.

Victims : The JAMs, The Left-behind, ...

→ T. May: I recognize that there are many people who are just about managing and struggling to get by (14/12/2016)...who are struggling to make ends meet and who have no savings (11/10/2017)

Enemy = Those who are to blame for “the left-behind’s” predicament are the Labour who are depicted as the enemy

That is the agenda of uniting and levelling up, and making sure that we invest in places that for decades were betrayed by Labour and left behind (20/07/2022)

Measure which we took to give financial help to people who are just about managing—the Labour party opposed them (16/01/2019)

Ashfield and Eastwood has been left behind, ignored and forgotten about decades of Labour-run councils and Labour MPs (14/10/2020)

Labour wants to bring people down; we want to raise people up (15/05/2019)

The Saviour = Finally, the benevolent hero-leader = the saviour = The Conservative Gvt= Only a Conservative gvt is able to ease the plight of “the most vulnerable”.

We have put in place record support to help the most vulnerable in our society [...] showing the power of the United Kingdom Government (13/09/2023)

...The most vulnerable..., there will be a strong and robust Gvt response (07/12/2022)

We will always protect the most vulnerable and we will do this in a fair and compassionate way. (26/10/22)

I am proud of my and this gvt’s tack record supporting the most vulnerable in our society (09/11/2022+ 25/01/2023)

UK gvt to safeguard and protect the most vulnerable (16/11/22)

This is a gvt who will always look after the most vulnerable in our society (14/12/2022)

We are levelling up across the country (26/05/2021) + We will unite and level up this country (05/02/2020)

This demonstrates that this gvt's support for those who want to work hard and get on (02/07/2014)

That is a Conservative party standing for working people (15/07/2015)

The dramatization and the highly emotional quality of the narrative is compelling inducing the victim to trust the hero-leader (here the gvt) and acknowledge their authority. The reference groups (The left-behind...) function as symbolic and mythical populations whose purpose is to convince citizens, and more importantly voters, of the Conservative Government's legitimacy and efficiency.

The mechanics of persuasion through symbols have been brilliantly explained by Murray Edelman: It is characteristic of large numbers of people in our society to see and think in terms of stereotypes, personalization, and oversimplifications, they cannot recognize or tolerate ambiguous and complex situations, and accordingly they respond chiefly to symbols that oversimplify and distort → P 31 The symbolic uses of politics

The reference groups have become symbolic objects created by the Conservatives as a trademark to identify the positive features and actions of the party. Such symbols are used as vehicles for condensing and simplifying a variety of stimuli and feelings. The aim for the Conservatives is to imbue the name of the reference groups (ex: the left behind) with value and significance which reflect positively on the party.

During PMQs, those mythical groups have been regarded as the property /the preserve of the Conservative party

And as symbols can be used and reused in different contexts and by anyone, the Opposition has been keen to undermine the potency of the symbols by endowing them with new meaning rousing negative feelings towards the Conservatives. As a consq, for some, the term "the Left behind" is also the symbol of the 'callousness or the unfairness of the Conservative Gvt towards the very groups they claim to care for and protect.

11/11/2020 Ian Blackford: Another group who have been left behind by this Prime Minister are the 3 million people who have been completely excluded from the UK Government support

22/04/2020 Will the gvt think on this again and do the right thing to make sure that no one is left behind—yes or no?

Corbyn: ...her cruel and unfair policies have pushed councils to the brink and left those "just about managing" not being able to manage at all

12/09/2018: Ian Blackford: Tell us, Prime Minister: why have you abandoned millions of families – those just about managing?

23/11/2016: Tim Faron : ... does the Prime Minister worry that her Government are only just about managing?

In these cases, the symbol has backfired on its creator. It is used to discredit and undermine the opponent's legitimacy and authority. In a confrontational context like the PMQs, those idioms/terms are used as political instruments to score points in a zero-sum game. The very places, people or organisations that have been left-behind have been reified into political weapons and instruments of/for party promotion.

4. From a definitional genealogy of the left behind to a genealogy of the Conservatives policies

As demonstrated earlier, the nature and function of these terms are manifold in the context of PMQs, but their definitional substance is virtually non-existent. That is the reason why it's proved difficult to draw an accurate definition from the genealogy of the term "The Left-Behind" in such a context. It has become a convenient "catch-all" term (used by a "catch-all" party). However, this semantic lineage proves more efficient in identifying the various political strategies and policies of the successive Conservative governments. A link can be established between the evolution of the name given to the reference groups and the evolution of the policies aimed at solving their problems (at least on the face of it).

David Cameron's repeated address to "hard-working families" is evidence of a strategy to stigmatise benefit recipients and to place work and individual responsibility at the heart of his welfare reform (in a "compassionate" way though). His strategy was also a way to appeal to the working class (D. Cameron claimed *'we are the true workers party now and the modern trade union movement, 15/10/2014*). In some ways, D. Cameron is the one who gave the narrower definition of all the reference groups mentioned in this paper: the hard-working families.

Theresa May extends (even blurs) the definitional boundaries of the reference group, "the hard-working families" have become "ordinary working families" to finally become "the JAMs" removing the stigma of being a benefit recipient, suggesting that the state should play a greater role⁹.

Boris Johnson's left behind and levelling up policies placed a premium on geographical levelling up, *i.e.*, policies aimed at helping some regions to catch up with wealthier parts of the UK.

Those reference groups have one thing in common, they signal a shift from the "nasty party" and a return to the One Nation roots of the party trying to avoid clear identification with the targeted groups. The study of the morphology of the term "the Left behind" brings to the fore an evolutionary process rather than a succession of unrelated notions and concepts.

Conclusion: In the context of PMQs which can be regarded as a communication and promotion platform one of the favoured rhetorical instruments is the use of symbols and myths. The myths, in their polar forms, make the world meaningful and rationalize the world. This oversimplification is made possible by the ambiguity of the symbols. The mythical populations are not defined empirically and even less so scientifically or statistically, they are "everyone". The morphology of the term evolves but the referent never changes. From the cultivation of the working-class voters to virtually any voters, the reference groups encompass whoever wants to belong to these groups for any reasons. It precisely because the terms do not have fixed definitional anchorage that the symbolic quality of these groups persist. What is relevant is not so much the definition of the terms but the assessment of their political power in terms of persuasion and manipulation.

⁹ The British General Election of 2017, P Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 54, "Timothy's priority was to use the levers of gvt to help the less well-off".