Populism and the 'Left Behind': Towards a clearer conceptualisation

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Of all the conceptual tools used to explain the rise of populism, few have been more widely invoked than the notion of 'left behind' places. As globalisation has concentrated opportunities in various high growth urban clusters, many communities in rural areas, it is argued, have been 'left behind' - abandoned to face the social and economic problems that come with deindustrialisation. Moreover, it is frequently alleged that these left behind places have become engines of populism, powering the anti-establishment revolt seen in the United States with the Trump Election, The United Kingdom with the Brexit referendum, and in much of continental Europe with the success of right-wing populist parties.

Understanding these events through the conceptual lens of the 'left behind' or some similar formulation has become a common feature of academic research. Rodríguez-Pose, for instance, has described the populist wave as the 'revenge of the places that don't matter' (2018)[1]. Similarly, in discussing the rise of the populist UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK, Goodwin & Milazzo talked of 'Left Behind Britain' as the foundation of this political shift (2015). Such positions have also been frequently invoked and repeated in media commentary - becoming something of a trope (Bershidsky, 2018; Harris, 2017; Economist, 2017). Thus, the idea of the 'left behind' has become embedded in the contemporary vocabulary for discussing populism and inequality. [2]

Perhaps inevitably, this discussion has generated some reaction against the usefulness of the term 'left behind' as a label. Inglehart & Norris have compared the left-behind thesis as an explanation of populism with an alternative explanation of 'cultural backlash' which they regard as more plausible (2016). Gordon, has questioned the *sense* in which

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[1] In an interview Pose has made clear that he sees this description as interchangeable with 'left behind places' (Carter & Rodríguez-Pose, 2018)

[2] For further examples: Rodriguez-Pose (2018), Wuthnow (2018), Russel Hochschild (2016), and especially Ford and Goodwin (2014) and Goodwin (2016)

communities are being left behind, arguing that use of the term has a tendency towards excessive reductionism (2018). Moreover, in certain corners of the media landscape there appears to be a strong hostility towards the 'left behind' label and a conviction that it points in the wrong direction for understanding and combatting populism (Illing, 2018; Wolcott, 2018) .

Part of the reason why discussion (and criticism) of the left behind idea is so pervasive may be that the term itself is somewhat ambiguous. As Gordon has emphasised, the left behind label can be understood in distinct ways sometimes being used to describe economic problems and sometimes to denote being 'culturally' left behind. Moreover, the term often appears heavily value-laden, connected to notions of grievance and victimhood that both enhance its emotional resonance and arouse suspicion in certain quarters. Clarifying such issues and developing a clearer conceptualisation of the 'left behind' may therefore be useful, both for determining its value as a concept of academic research and for responding to concerns in the public dissemination of such research.

This paper aims to move towards a clearer conceptualisation of what 'left behind' means, and what exactly makes a community 'left behind' rather than merely poor or disadvantaged. Building on existing accounts, it argues that 'left behind' communities are defined by the intersection of political-economic *and* social-cultural exclusion but that furthermore, this self-ascription must be combined with a narrative of social decline and abandonment from within the community itself (Gordon, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Wuthnow, 2018). It also argues that the concept can fruitfully be linked with insights from social-geography, and that social and psychological distance from centers of power should be seen as playing a central role in the construction of 'left behind places' (Enos, 2017). Through this conceptualisation, I hope to clarify where 'left behind' as a term can be useful in the study of populism and where, by contrast, it can hinder or confuse understanding.

What follows is a short review of broad trends in recent literature on the 'left behind' aiming to highlight tensions in how the term is used. I then share the early development of a conceptual framework that aims to address these tensions. The paper reflects my preliminary theoretical and methodological thinking prior to fieldwork I will undertake in late November 2018 exploring right-wing populism in small communities of West Virginia, US. I therefore conclude the paper with a short discussion of how the conceptual

framework discussed here has influenced my case-selections and preparations for this fieldwork.

Literature – key classifying trends

Although the concept of the 'left behind' has a long history and has been employed at various times in political discourse in the service of diverse causes, its close association with populism is a more recent phenomena; emerging in the last decade and proliferating after the 'year of populism' that was 2016 (Taylor, 2016). This section of the paper reviews the existing usage of the term both among journalists and in academic research, exploring both how the term is used, and why some scholars and commentators appear to find it problematic. The purpose of the section is to show that existing usage of the term, both in popular media narratives and extant academic accounts involve tensions and ambiguities; chiefly between political-economic conceptions of the 'left behind' and a more social-cultural understanding. The section also examines why some critics appear to dislike the term left-behind, concluding that this scepticism derives from suspicions regarding the value-laidenness of the term.

The political-economic conception of the left behind

Undoubtedly, the most popular usage of 'left-behind' centres primarily on the impact of economic dislocation. The following statement by Ford and Goodwin in discussing the rise of UKIP in Britain, is fairly emblematic.

> *Over recent decades, deep social and economic changes have hit particular groups within British society very hard: older, less skilled and less well educated working class voters. These are the groups we describe as the 'left behind' in modern Britain.* (10, 2014).

The socio-economic changes Ford and Goodwin have in mind include unemployment, stagnating wages and living standards and deterioration of local public services on which lower-income people may disproportionately rely (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, p. 143). Alongside this, accompanying social problems such as increased crime, higher levels of environment related mental illness such as depression, increased alcohol and drug abuse, and higher levels of family breakdown, contribute to the alienation given communities'

experience. The precise character of such problems may vary from community to community within nations and of course across nations; in the deindustrialised American Rust Belt, for example, undoubtedly the opioid epidemic would have a more prominent place. Yet, they all stem from socio-economic dislocation and this, according to the Ford and Goodwin perspective, is what defines the 'left behind' and drives support for populist politics.

Ford and Goodwin's socio-economic account of the left behind is not particularly geographically orientated in its outlook. For them the left behind are primarily a class of individuals defined by a certain education and skill level who are therefore victims of certain socio-economic trends (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, pp. 175–176). They may well be densely gathered in specific areas, but alternatively, they may live among those not 'left behind' and in any case their geographic location is not a particularly essential feature of their identity as 'left behind'. Other scholars, while sharing the socio-economic emphasis, stress the importance of space. Pose (2014) has argued that the problems of 'places that don't matter' can be mainly attributed to the insistence of policy-makers that economic dynamism *depends* on the free development of high-growth clusters, and the subsequent abandonment of regional development and regeneration policies. This, Pose argues, has created a populist revolt 'with strong territorial, rather than social foundations'(2018, p.189). Pose thus shares Ford and Goodwin's focus on socio-economic problems as central to the 'left behind' but see more of a central role for the 'place-based' effects of socio-economic change.

Commenting on those that see the left behind in terms of the effect of socio-economic trends, Gordon, (2018), remarks that it is primarily globalisation that such writers have in mind. It is, after all, increased trade liberalisation and immigration flows that may have undermined the prospects of low-skilled workers in the West. It is also the need for specialisation to exploit comparative advantage in the international economy that has driven the emergence of high-growth clusters in many countries, producing the regional inequality that creates 'left behind places'. At any rate, as Pose emphasises, it is a belief in this need that had increasingly driven the thinking of policy-makers on urban policy (2018, pp. 191–192). This focus on globalisation has received considerable media attention. For instance in 2017 The Economist magazine published a special issue on left behind places.

Describing such places as 'globalisation's losers' it embraced a range of 'place sensitive policies' aimed at addressing their problems and thereby stemming the populist tide (Economist, 2017). For a liberal magazine, traditionally defined by its individual centred non-corporatist approach to public policy to write 'Assuaging the anger of the left-behind means realising places matter too' is testament to the influence this conception of the left behind has attained.

Yet alongside discussion of the impersonal forces of globalisation driving regional inequality, many accounts also emphasise how the 'left behind' are effected by deliberate political choices. Pose, (2018) makes clear that the choice of policy-makers to move away from regional development and renewal policies has been the primary source of anger and resentment in left behind places. Meanwhile Ford & Goodwin, (2014) when discussing the appeal of UKIP to 'left behind voters' in the UK emphasised how these voters had been neglected by the mainstream political parties, who had calculated that such voters were not central to their electoral strategy.

The account of left-behind places emergent in such writings, then, is primarily a political-economic conception. In this account, left behind places are those communities disadvantaged by economic changes such as globalisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. Moreover they have been neglected politically by governments and mainstream political parties, who have chosen to focus their efforts on 'places that do matter' such as major cities and economically developing regions (Pose, 2018). Authors supporting this account do not necessarily deny the importance of cultural or social values; Ford & Goodwin, (2014), in particular emphasise that one way 'left behind voters' feel abandoned by mainstream parties is having their social values on issues like patriotism, immigration, crime, or social change, ignored or disrespected. Nonetheless, in such accounts it is primarily the sense of political and economic exclusion that defines the experience of the 'left behind.

Social-cultural perceptions of the left behind

This close association of 'left-behind' with the socio-economic effects of globalisation, however, make it a potential casualty of broader debates concerning the main causes of populism. Inglehart and Norris (2016) have sought to contrast two broad explanations for the rising support for populist parties. Firstly the '*economic insecurity perspective*' focused on the socio-economic effects described earlier. Secondly the *cultural backlash thesis* which posits that growing differences in cultural and moral values have led to a populist revolt. In establishing this dichotomy, they note how the concept of 'left-behind' is typically part of the conceptual armoury of the former perspective. They write:

> According to [the economic insecurity view], rising economic insecurity among the left-behinds has fuelled popular resentment of the political classes…blaming 'Them' from stripping prosperity, job opportunities and public services from 'Us'. (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 2)

In their analysis of data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey however, Inglehart and Norris reject this view, arguing a preponderance of evidence supports the cultural backlash thesis.

The association of 'left-behind' as a concept with the economic insecurity thesis has encouraged some who support more culture centred perspectives to dispute the concept. Mutz for instance, has forcefully attacked the 'left-behind thesis', and by extension the term itself as a beguiling misdirection in the quest to understand populism, the real cause of which,is 'perceived status threats amoung high-status groups'(Mutz, 2018, p. 1). Such views are echoed in certain progressive media outlets where the 'left behind' label is sometimes viewed as serving a propagandistic function for populists, presenting as sympathetic victims the populist voters who are really motivated by xenophobic and exclusionary political values.(Illing, 2018; Wolcott, 2018).

Yet, despite many defenders and critics of the left-behind thesis viewing it largely through a socio-economic lens, there is also a competing tendency which interprets it more in a cultural context. From this perspective, the left-behind should be understood not necessarily as economically disadvantaged, but rather as culturally abandoned; left at sea by bewildering value changes in the media, popular culture and among younger generations. This conception of the 'culturally left behind', is also evident in the work of

Inglehart and Norris. In advancing their cultural backlash explanation they argue that older voters and those from religious and ethnic majorities;

> …..are the groups most likely to feel that they have become strangers from the predominant values in their own country, left behind by progressive tides of cultural change which they do not share (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 5).

Discussing the rise of Trump in the US, they specifically argue that voters feel 'left behind' by support for gay marriage, rights for transsexual, gender equality, and immigration rights.

This culture based conception of 'left behind' is taken further by Wuthnow (2018). In his sociological study of communities in rural America, Wuthnow emphasises that such places are 'moral communities', driven by dense networks of reciprocal duties and particular sets of core values such as self-sufficiency and close kin-group loyalties. He attributes the roots of populist rage primarily to a sense among inhabitants in such places that those at the centre of power do not share their moral values, or worse, actively look down on the way of life in rural communities. In this account, socio-economic problems may exist in left behind places and may be blamed on government elites. However, they do not define communities as left behind nor do they fundamentally drive the politics of such communities, this instead being the role of perceived cultural clashes between the community and the dominant cultural values of the nation.

Complaints of value-ladenness

There is then a clear tension between those that see 'left-behind' as primarily a political-economic concept related to the problems of globalisation and those who see it as a social-cultural concept related to value differences or status anxiety within certain groups. Alongside this however, there also appears to be a general sense of hostility towards 'left-behind' *as a concept*. This is frequently reported in the media, particularly on the political left. The form of this hostility differs significantly in different cases. Yet when compared they appear to share a common theme; the sense that 'left-behind' is an inherently value-laden term with too much normative baggage to be used fairly or neutrally.

One argument regarding this value-ladenness is that the term 'left-behind' inherently assigns moral blame to the agent or group that did the 'leaving behind'; whether that is a government that neglected socio-economic problems or mainstream communities with contempt for the left-behind's values. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, this viewpoint is often accompanied by the idea that left-behind intrinsically confers a sense of victimhood on people and communities which may not be appropriate. In this regard a comment made by journalist Sean Illing in an interview with Wuthnow is revealing. Illing remarks how the term 'left behind' 'rubbed me the wrong way', because 'it seems…that many of these people haven't been left behind; they've chosen not to keep up' and 'the sense of victimisation appears to overwhelm everything else' (Illing, 2018). According to this view, 'left-behind' is a term that creates villains and victims by definitial fiat, presenting as matters of fact certain claims about process and status that are in truth matters of ongoing dispute. It is therefore a problematic term for use when trying to assess the causes of populism.

Somewhat related to the idea of left-behind as causing artificial victim-designation, are complaints about the selectivity of 'left-behind' as a term. Progressives argue that the term is rarely used to describe disadvantaged communities such as majority ethnic minority areas in inner cities, instead nearly always referring to rural, mostly white communities that are still often relatively less economically disadvantaged (Bhambra, 2017). There is thus a suspicion on the political left that 'left-behind' reinforces a conservative position that non-minorities are being ignored in favour of others, and thus that the term cannot be used in a neutral and objective way

A third objection to the left-behind label, by contrast, emphasises that such descriptions may incorrectly and patronisingly portray communities as driven by nostalgia and reactionary values. Journalist John Harris, for instance, has argued that places typically described as 'left-behind' are for the most part just facing economic insecurity and uncertainty, leading to increased demands for community and stabilisation. These, Harris argues 'are modern demands voiced in truly modern places', and thus he sees the left-behind as a taking on 'a deeply condescending aspect'(2018).

This short literature review has shown, that despite its frequent usage, the term 'left-behind' is often ambiguous and perceived as problematic. In particular a tension between 'left

behind' as a political-economic concept or as a more cultural-social term permeates the existing literature. In addition, the left-behind label runs into difficulty because of the value-laden connotations of the term – be it in assigning blame to a perpetrator, valorising communities as 'victims', or condescending them as nostalgic and backward. An appropriate conceptualisation of left behind places must then resolve the ambiguity between the socio-economic and cultural meaning as well as clarifying the value-laden aspects of the term. This is pursued by the paper in the following section.

Conceptual Framework

A satisfying conceptual framework for the idea of 'left behind places' will have two qualities. Firstly it will address both the socio-economic and cultural-moral connotations associated with being left behind. Secondly, it will avoid the value-laden aspects with which the term is frequently associated. This section aims to map out such a conceptual framework. Firstly it develops a two by two matrix typology which attempts to integrate the cultural and socio-economic meanings of the left behind concept. Secondly I argue that left-behind places must be defined in terms of a *perceived narrative of social decline*, and that they should be understood in terms of a social geographic distance from perceived centres of administrative power (Enos, 2017). Thirdly, I argue that by defining 'left-behind' places in terms of *perceived* narratives of decline and social geographic distance from power, it is possible to avoid the charge of value-ladenness, with the term implying neither wrongdoing on the part of outsiders nor victimhood on the part of insiders. This process, I argue, leads to a clear, distinctive and robust conceptualising of the 'left behind' which is of potential use for the social sciences.

Distinguishing and combining the socio-economic and the cultural

Taking as a fact that the left behind label is used to describe both socio-economic disadvantage and cultural isolation, it is probably a mistake to try and directly settle this tension in favour of one or the other meaning. Instead, a more promising strategy may be to recognise two distinct senses of the term – being socio-economically left behind and being culturally left behind. These two senses may be entirely distinct – it is possible to be economically prosperous and central to the material life of a community and yet be

disconnected from its prevailing social values, just as it is possible to be economically disconnected whilst being culturally central. However, it is also possible for cultural disconnection and socio-economic difficulty to interconnect – leading to special difficulties and perhaps the only cases which are truly 'left behind'. By breaking these different possibilities down, distinguishing their unique characteristics, and sorting them into a typology it is possible, I hope, to move towards a more fine-grained use of the 'left behind 'term.

If the notions of cultural and socio-economic inclusion/exclusion are gathered together in a two-by-two matrix (as shown below in Figure 1), four distinct categories exist. Firstly, there is the space which is both socio-economically secure and dominated by cultural values perceived to be shared in the nation. Such communities, which this paper will term '*included places*' can be seen as the mirror image of left behind places. In such communities material prosperity and the satisfaction of seeing established cultural values reinforced in the wider society are likely to lead to reasonable levels of contentment with the status quo.[3] The two forces are likely to be reinforcing, with economic prosperity bolstering a sense that the community has the 'right' values and thus generating a sense of optimism and self-confidence highly unamenable to disruptive, populist politics.

A second category comprises communities that are socio-economically disadvantaged but do not, in general feel culturally-socially isolated. Such places may be termed '*distressed communities*'. In such communities there may be anger at the economic problems the community faces, and a desire for radical policy solutions. Yet, such anger will not necessarily manifest itself as a reaction against a wider society that has supposedly abandoned the community's values. Moreover, the profound feeling of loss accompanying emigration for the community, particularly of the young, which both Pose and Wuthnow discuss, is perhaps likely to be lessened if there is a sense that the values of the community are widely present elsewhere. This is because, in such circumstances, the decline of the community need not entail the decline of a *valued way of life* - which instead continues elsewhere.

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[3] I draw this idea from the concept in Weberian Sociology, that economic conditions often play a critical role in reinforcing social values of a community (Weber, 1905, 1922)

A third category comprises communities that are socio-economically prosperous, but feel culturally disconnected from mainstream culture. This paper will term such communities '*moral islands*'; denoting that they are on relatively 'high-ground' in terms of socio-economic status, but are surrounded by a 'sea' of cultural values perceived to be different from their own. The term 'moral' here is not intended to suggest any objective ethical superiority, but only separateness in held social values. People within such moral islands are likely to feel a sense of separateness from the political mainstream and may feel embattled by wider trends in the political culture. They are more likely to support movements focussed on giving them special representation within the political process. However without accompanying economic decline, they may have less reason to feel acute insecurity or pessimism. They consequently may be less susceptible to self-consciously extremist 'anti-system' forms of politics, preferring to seek safeguards for their community within an established system in which they can potentially wield a disproportionate degree of power.

The final category, combining socio-economic and cultural exclusion, may most properly be termed 'left behind'. Such communities face problems of socio-economic decline similar to distressed communities and have perceived value differences from mainstream society similar to moral islands. The combination of these produce a profound sense of loss and alienation. Moreover, as with included places, the interaction between socio-economic and cultural exclusion can be reinforcing, with economic decline undermining confidence in the community's value system. The end result is a sense of collective alienation from mainstream politics which may easily translate to support for populist movements.

This conceptual typology, summarised below, is intended in the tradition of Weberian 'Ideal Types', and obviously conforms to reality to a limited extent (Weber, 1922). Notwithstanding the obvious problems in defining discreet communities, and of viewing such communities as homogeneous enough to be uniformly 'included' or 'excluded', it might be objected that socio-economic and cultural exclusion will nearly always be found together and that therefore that cases of 'distressed communities' or 'moral islands' will be rare (Ford & Goodwin, 2014). All these points are broadly accepted. In particular, based on a Neo-Marxian inspired perspective that socio-economic exclusion typically produces cultural exclusion, I would suggest that 'distressed communities' - defined as socio-

economically-excluded but culturally included places - are likely to be largely theoretical. By contrast, I would suggest that 'moral islands' – socio-economically included places that nonetheless feel culturally excluded – are much more common and that, for instance, many of the communities Wuthnow discusses are better described by this label than the label 'left behind'

	Culturally included	Culturally excluded
Socio-economically included	**Included Places**	**Moral Islands**
Socio-economically excluded	**Distressed Communities**	**'Left Behind' Places**

Figure 1

However, even if such categories may not exist in the real world, at the level of theory I would defend it as a useful thought experiment to imagine the circumstances of 'distressed communities' and 'moral islands' as compared to 'left behind' places proper. Such a thought experiment may make it easier to see the distinct role that cultural and socio-economic factors play in shaping left behind places – with for instance socio-economic factors creating a sense of a community in decline, and cultural values regarding the uniqueness of that community making such decline an especially traumatic process. In this way, I hope such a conceptual framework can help clarify how the 'left behind' idea relates to both cultural and socioeconomic explanations for populism.

Narrative, Perception and Social Geography

As a descriptive term, 'left behind' implies dynamism – to be left behind suggests an earlier period in which one was not left behind. It also arguably implies intent from an outside actor – generally one is 'left behind' *by* someone else. As discussed in the literature review, Pose defines left behind places in this way, saying such places have been abandoned and 'told they don't matter' by governments that have proved incapable of delivering urban

renewal (2018, p. 199). A question then, is whether these attributes –experiencing decline and being abandoned by government - should be considered as part of the definition of 'left behind places'.

From a directly policy-orientated perspective such as Pose's, such a move potentially makes sense.[4] If the interest is in proposing policy solutions to help the 'left behind' and in critiquing previous policy approaches which may have failed, it is obviously relevant to know whether a place has experienced decline and what the response of governments have been. From the perspective of understanding the causes of populism however, and the role that left behind places play in this, what is relevant is less whether places have declined and faced abandonment, but whether people living there *feel* that this has been the case (Wuthnow, 2018). It should also be noted that merely requiring a *perception* of decline and abandonment for a place to be considered left behind makes the concept less restricted and widens the potential number of cases that are applicable. For this reason, I suggest that a definition of 'left behind places' should require that a *narrative of social decline and abandonment* be widely expressed within the community.

Once crucial aspect of such a narrative concerns perceptions within communities of the central administrative state. When the state is perceived as active and playing a positive role in the community, it may be comparatively harder for a narrative of abandonment to take hold in the community. Instead, community problems may be blamed on other sources, including internal issues within the community itself, and such diagnosis again may not lead to support for anti-establishment populism. Of course, it is possible for the central state to be active and perceived as playing a negative role. In such circumstances communities may come to think of themselves as 'oppressed', which may in turn lead to support for a particular type of populist politics (Solomon, 1987). Yet this situation is still likely to differ from one in which the state is perceived to be absent or inactive. Only in these circumstances are narratives of abandonment likely to become established.

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[4] Pose is clear that he believes a range of place orientated measures to address regional inequality would be desirable in many states, and that he is making the link between the 'left behind' and populism specifically to argue this.

It is in this context that social geography is relevant to the concept of left behind. Social geography offers insights into how various forms of distance, physical, social, psychological and political help shape people's attitudes, particularly towards perceived 'others' (Enos, 2017). Drawing on this, I would suggest that perceived distance from centres of power may play an important part in establishing narratives of being 'left behind'. In particular, high levels of social distance – distance in terms of the frequency and contact between people within a community and any aspect of the state may be of critical importance in establishing a narrative of abandonment and making a community 'left behind'.

To take an example from the USA, recent scholarship has suggested that the federal American state has certain features that make many of its activities invisible to citizens (Mettler, 2011). Policies on welfare, policing, infrastructure spending and industrial policy are often handled indirectly through block grants to state and local governments, or by subsidies and tax breaks to private companies in exchange for the provision of public services. This can be seen as increasing the social and psychological distance between citizens and the central state. It is possible that such effects, when applied to a community that faces broader cultural and socio-economic exclusion helps to cement a narrative of abandonment. This may help explain why many communities in the US, particularly in poor and rural states where the influence of the federal government is even less obvious, may come to think of themselves as left behind places.

The charge of value-ladenness

This paper then proposes a conceptualisation of 'left behind places' as communities that experience both cultural and socio-economic exclusion and in which this experience is combined with a narrative of social decline and abandonment. In the literature review, I noted three criticisms of the left-behind label all of which centred on the supposed value ladenness of the term. Firstly that it assigns blame to a central state and victim status to communities when this may be undeserved. Secondly that it is selectively applied and tends to be used only for some disadvantaged communities rather than others. Thirdly, that the term can appear patronising or condescending to 'left behind places'. To conclude, I now discuss how such a conceptualisation may help resolve some of the common complaints made against the 'left behind' term.

Essentially I would suggest that defining 'left-behind' in terms of perceptions and narratives, as opposed to objective reality, circumvents the first problem. It may indeed be the case that left behind places have been wronged by government, or it may not, but the important thing from the point of view of understanding populism is when a *perception* of such abandonment exists. Similarly, no value-judgement need be made about the culture of 'left-behind places' or that such cultures inevitably are in decline. All that is relevant is whether a *perception* of such decline exists which is potentially conducive to support for populism.

Secondly, I would suggest that distinguishing between cultural and economic exclusion and emphasising the need for both helps address the charge of selectivity. I would further argue that emphasising social geography in defining the left-behind is important here. In many urban and ethnically diverse communities, which according to critics of the 'left behind' concept, are often unfairly not included in the category, the social and psychological distance to the central state may be relatively small, thanks to issues like heavy policing or highly target policy interventions (Bhambra, 2017). Such lower distance is not necessarily beneficial - it may fit into narratives about oppressive or damaging policy, but it is likely to produce a somewhat different response than when the state is perceived to be absent. It may thus be possible to defend prevailing usage of the term 'left behind' without being guilty of unfounded selectivity.

Conclusion – future applications

This paper has sought to examine existing usage of the term 'left behind' in order to identify ambiguities in how the term is used and to assess why it faces criticisms in certain quarters. It argued that existing usage is characterised by an ambiguity between political-economic and social-cultural conceptualisations and that the left-behind concept is sometimes criticised due to the perceived value-ladenness of the term. Following this, the paper has offered a conceptual framework which aims to distinguish social-cultural and political-economic exclusion and define left-behind places as the intersection of both. It has further argued that defining left behind places in terms of established *narratives* of decline and abandonment and in terms of social-distance from centres of power can potentially purge the term of the value-ladenness that some find objectionable.

As mentioned in the introduction, this work is part of a developing theoretical framework for a larger project concerning left behind places in West Virginia. According to the Economic Innovation Group's Distressed Communities Index, West Virginia has 34.4% of its population living in a 'distressed community', the third highest level of any state in the US. It was also the state most supportive of Donald Trump, with 68% of West Virginians voting for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election and 77% voting for him in Republican primaries of that year. With data collection scheduled for late November 2018 - the project will examine the reasons for such support and how far the concept of 'left-behind places' can be used to understand it.

Following interviews with policy-makers in Washington DC and the West-Virginia State capital of Charleston, the study will involve case studies of four west-Virginian towns

- Romney: Hampshire Country
- Welch: McDowell County
- Hamlin: Lincoln Country
- Winfield: Putnam Country

These communities are intended to approximate different parts of the typology developed in this paper. Romney Welch and Hamlin are located in the some of the poorest counties of in the state, with median household income of $24,921, $27,995 and $35,800 respectively, and thus all could be considered socio-economically excluded. Yet Welch is also one of the few small towns in West Virginia to have a significant non-white minority and thus may be less excluded from socio-cultural changes in the US regarding growing racial diversity. Winfield meanwhile is from the one of the most prosperous counties in the state, with a median household income of $56,774, yet has demographics in terms of age, religion and racial diversity similar to much of the rest of West Virginia. I therefore will view Romney and Hamlin as 'left-behind places', Welch as closer to a 'distressed community' and Winfield as closer to 'moral island'. By examining the differences and similarities between these communities; the relative social distance to the state, the prevailing narratives regarding the community and its relationship to government, and finally the appeal of populist politics in each location, I hope to explore further how the conception of 'left behind' places developed in this paper may be applied in practice.

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