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Back to the Future: On the British liberal left's return to its origins

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Recent research has revealed the drift of some former Labour voters towards the far right (Winlow et al 2017). Many more who still vote Labour hold a centre-right position that supports the failing neoliberal project, and, given Labour's commitment to the Remain campaign, others have grudgingly thrown their support behind the Tories. This research has attracted predictable criticism. Many continue to argue that the far right is principally a middle-class phenomenon (Antonucci et al, 2017; Bhambra, 2017), and others appear to be convinced, despite manifold evidence to the contrary, that the working class remain committed to the left's diverse policy agenda (see, for example, Mason, 2019). However, these criticisms simply reinforce our concerns about the left's naivety. The drift to the far right might be relatively small – although the number of people who tacitly sympathise with this position is unknown – but taken together, the political groups that span the spectrum from centre-right to far right, when combined with understandably cynical non-voters, constitute in key constituencies a powerful force that is likely to prevent a Corbyn-led Labour Party from achieving an overall majority.

At the time of writing the Tories are ahead in all the polls and the Brexit Party continue to represent a significant electoral force. This is precisely the wrong time for the left to mire itself in complacency, dogma and tunnel-vision. In the social sciences, we have seen the return of incredibly naïve accounts of media effects that, put simply, suggest that the media equip people with their attitudes and beliefs in a direct and unfiltered manner. Such simplistic accounts were dismissed out of hand decades ago but have recently been resurrected by sections of the liberal left in an effort to explain away high levels of working-class support for Brexit and tighter immigration controls. The reality of everyday life has yet again been dismissed as a formative context by the liberal left as we follow the standard convention of focusing solely on mass-mediated 'narratives' and 'discourses'. Rather than attempting to explain why many ordinary people support Brexit and call for tighter immigration, and how such views may relate to their day-to-day experiences, we are left only with the timeless critique of the Tory press and their malign myths and stereotypes. The Tory press has, of course, played a role in our cultural life for centuries, but its influence did not, in the post-war era, prevent significant shifts to the left in popular culture and nor did it prevent seven Labour

victories before the dawning of the ‘new Labour’ era, one of which was the game-changing landslide victory of 1945.

A populist groundswell drifting more to the nationalist right than the left is observable all over Europe (Golder, 2016). We could be entering an era in which what we now know as the left must undergo a fundamental rethink or die out as an electoral force, leaving the liberal centre to fight it out with an increasingly radical right. The working-class people we interviewed who had drifted into far-right activism or expressed background support were not immersed in traditional far-right tropes. One finding stood out – over and above their racism and deep fear of radical Islam, the principal target of their ire was what they understood as the middle-class liberal left, not necessarily ‘metropolitan’ but certainly alienated and driven by antagonistic interests.

This is the finding that should compel the left to abandon its self-righteous dogma, its ineffective post-68 cultural turn and its divisive identity politics to rethink its position. However, the reaction to our research does not suggest that the current left has the humility, the wherewithal, the intellectual resources or the foresight to do so. Two years ago, one of us was invited to present our findings to the Norwegian Sociological Association, only to be accused of fabricating the data. In other words, professional sociologists simply refused to believe our finding that where our interviewees’ distaste for Islam was nuanced, the hatred they felt for self-styled middle-class ‘progressives’ was pure and untrammelled. Since 2016 this hatred has been intensified by the tendency of middle-class liberals to pour scorn on Brexit voters. Some of the vitriol expressed by Remainers has verged on the eugenicist, identifying Leavers as Hillary Clinton’s stereotype of irredeemably stupid and racist ‘basket of deplorables’ to be consigned to the dustbin of history. These occasionally malicious liberals, intent on overturning a democratic vote that did not go their way, seem unaware that they might well be cleaving a new social division that could scupper the left’s chances for generations.

The Western liberalised left that developed from the mid-19th century appears to be running out of energy and approaching its demise as a potent electoral force. This descent is occurring despite its claim to have led the fight against sexism and racism, a conceit which, when one considers the bigger picture, usurps the struggles that were actually led by women and members of ethnic minority groups themselves. However, without some degree of regulatory

control in the field of political economy – especially the inner core of finance and investment (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017) – the liberal left can do little about the class divide in a time of austerity and chronic economic insecurity (Lloyd, 2018). The liberal left has been on the run from deep political intervention in the economy for over forty years. The Labour Party has recently adopted what it calls its ‘fiscal credibility rule’, (Labour Party, 2017), which limits the government’s use of its own currency as public investment by ‘closing down’ the deficit every five years. Consequently, it accepts the basic structure of neoliberal capitalism and the discredited ‘household analogy’ of macroeconomics (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017), thus continuing to rely mainly on educational support for those fit and willing to enter a highly competitive labour market and cultural sphere, whilst continuing subsistence welfare for those who don’t make the grade.

This abandonment of political economy and shift into the cultural dimension is the terminal point of what we might call the cultural current of ‘progressivism’. How did we get here? If we restrict our analysis to the British left, we can very briefly trace an important cultural current that has flowed alongside the historical development of the left’s political organisation. This current has surfaced periodically as what we might call ‘negative quilting points’, pinning the left down to a liberal discourse and preventing it from developing itself as the true voice of all working, underemployed and unemployed people, the unswerving critic of the political and economic elite, and the incubator in which economically feasible alternative systems could be formulated and proposed to the public.

As the British left began its struggle for existence as an organised political group in the 19th century it took advantage of the mass illiteracy amongst the nascent industrial working class. Workers were viewed as pawns in a chess game played by philanthropists, reformers and self-styled visionaries. Real problems were rarely brought to light. Everyday poverty, ill-health and exploitation were periodically ‘discovered’ and ‘rediscovered’ by reformers, but no systematic attempt was made to represent any real working-class issues embedded in structures and processes that lay deeper than the problems the reformers regarded as manageable within the liberal-capitalist system as it stood. More importantly, no systematic attempt was made to find and encourage intellectual and political leadership from within the working class itself. As mass literacy gathered pace from the mid-19th century, education beyond the functional was little more than induction into the world of middle-class values and parameters of possibility.

As the twentieth century wore on, however, and as the Russian Revolution failed to deliver true emancipation while some European nations turned sharply to the nationalistic right, middle-class liberal visionaries, sensing the urgency of the situation, took a radical turn. Leading figures such as Wilhelm Reich were joined by numerous psychologists, artists and political activists to infiltrate the left and cut a different sub-Gramscian path to some hazy libertine-anarcho-socialist destination by destroying old cultural values, norms and institutions, especially those which had developed around sexual practices. Education and other forms of mediated cultural persuasion were to be used to encourage new progressive subjectivities that would hold the old world in contempt and yearn for fundamental change. This idealist-transformative tactic found its eventual home in the Frankfurt School, the members of which produced lengthy and often difficult tomes promoting the transformation of subjectivities in preparation for politically driven change, the abandonment of vanguardism and political authority, and the melding of democracy with radicalism and progress.

Unfortunately, however, the radicals' ideas were in fact a form of cultural vanguardism, in its own way as authoritarian and elitist as the politburo. They remained far removed from the working class's experience of their structural position and their visions of their place in the world. The most common working-class vision was refreshingly simple – to remain pretty much as they were in the field of culture but with significantly more economic security and prosperity. Whereas some progressive liberals seemed quite keen on economic reform and a minority were attached to socialist or communist parties, they spent the bulk of their time attacking work, religion, nation, regional identity, law, family, marriage, folk music, patriarchy, heterosexuality, parochialism, and of course latterly racism. This combination of targets clumsily lumped together the obviously regressive and prejudicial with the working class's sole sources of comfort and identity, and did not elicit much support from everyday people, who, we might imagine, quickly became fed up being labelled 'reactionary' every time they expressed concern about the potential demise of one of their richer and more comforting traditions.

This dismissive cultural and subjectivist militancy had its own modern history. In the 19th century Engels posited cultural destruction as the first step towards revolution. Educated and articulate middle-class progressives monopolised all nascent left-wing organisations.

Chartists initially excluded working-class socialists and later moved into the Christian Socialist movement to shift it away from revolution, a move that influenced the formation of the Independent Labour Party. Ruskin and Mill influenced early socialist parties such as the Social Democratic Federation and Socialist Party of Great Britain, imposing their own progressive values on the movements and steering them away from menacing protests and hasty economic change. In 1865 the Reform League officially excluded all working-class involvement. As suffrage was expanded between the 1867 Reform Act and the 1884 Representation of the People Act, self-styled progressive liberals intensified their infiltration, funding candidates and monopolising the articulation of values and policies. Terrified of revolution, violent protests, loss of social position and substantive working-class representation in the field of political economy, middle-class liberals continued to attack working-class culture and side-lined the working class as much as they could. Even at this stage the actions of progressive liberals had made it very easy for conservatives to persuade working people that the nascent left was attempting to undermine their cultures, lifestyles and economic security. The liberal left's thoughtless continuation of this clumsy broad-spectrum cultural assault to the present day allows 'one-nation' conservatives to reproduce the same old Burkean critique with the same old persuasive effect (see for example Skelton 2019).

In 1900 the radical Social Democratic Federation disaffiliated from the new Labour Representation Committee. The LRC morphed into the Labour Party, which, under the influence of the middle-class liberal Fabians, immediately made a pact with the Liberal Party. The Webbs vacillated from denying workers' control to crafting Clause IV – which was about outcomes and rewards rather than control and influence – and supporting the Soviet Union, yet another system imposed upon the working class by a middle-class vanguard. Thus began another phase of endless debates, a state of metanoia, the left forged as a bourgeois mind in crisis, riddled with fear, loathing and guilt, and plagued by hasty visionary affectations and fantastic excuses for every failure that elite rule would foist on the population. The inter-wars years saw the continued marginalisation of working-class intellectuals and their organisations – for instance T.A. Jackson's Labour College project was displaced by the more liberal Workers' Educational Association and his book *Dialectics* (1936) is lauded only in retrospect (see Bounds 2017). The actual workers themselves, no matter how literate and gifted, were never really involved, and never considered for intellectual or political leadership.

The post-war 'new left' was a continuation of this elite control framed in a revised vision chastened by the horrors of Stalinism. The task of the liberal progressive elite was a difficult one – brushing aside the guilt-ridden and largely repentant Marxists, it had to convince the population that it would no longer lead from the top, from where big mistakes were made, but from the bottom, where, one assumes, only small mistakes would be made. The result was an intensification of the progressive influence on popular culture, dramatically presented as a 'reaching out' to the population and coming from 'where they were at', or at least where the middle class thought they were at. They seemed to assume that everyday people would fail to see this move for what it was – an updated tactic of social displacement in which middle-class liberals would descend into working-class life to convince people that whatever the progressive liberals had in mind was their idea. Stuart Hall (1960), in the introduction to the first edition of the *New Left Review*, declared:

We are convinced that politics, too narrowly conceived, has been a main cause of the decline of socialism in this country, and one of the reasons for the disaffection from socialist ideas of young people in particular. The humanist strengths of socialism—which are the foundations for a genuinely popular socialist movement—must be developed in cultural and social terms, as well as in economic and political [...] Our experience of life today is so extraordinarily fragmented. The task of socialism is to meet people where they are, where they are touched, bitten, moved, frustrated, nauseated—to develop discontent and, at the same time, to give the socialist movement some direct sense of the times and ways in which we live.

This, in 1960, was particularly bad timing. It assumed that people felt bitten, frustrated and discontent when the swinging sixties were getting underway and a whole generation was about to feel that the world is their oyster. The 'swinging sixties' was indeed a marketing slogan, but it was an effective one astutely predicated on a genuine feeling of optimism diffusing through the nation as that decade wore on. Only when recession bit in the mid-1970s did some young people feel like complying with the premature injunction issued by middle-class liberals to 'look back in anger'. Wages were rising, full employment was almost achieved and even the most technologically advanced consumer goods were within reach of the average family, and all this was orchestrated by a top-down social democratic 'new deal' fuelled by fiscal spending and Keynesian demand stimulus and capital exchange control. Not to worry – if the discontent doesn't really exist in any substantive form amongst enough

people to swing elections, thought the new left, perhaps we can whip some up. Over the pond, Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleagues suggested the best route forwards to close the chasm of alienation they imagined between their own self-styled high culture and mass culture was to somehow foster on the field of culture a discontent and alienation so deep that people would beg for some vaguely urbane, humanistic and socialistic way of life. At a time when most people could afford housing, domestic appliances and motor cars, yet still had enough disposable income and energy to go out and bop around to the Rolling Stones at least once a week, what could possibly go wrong? Had the 60s been a pit of poverty and misery for a significant majority the tactic was still incredibly naïve – amid such insecurity would people not look to their own traditions rather than a vague progressive vision they had played no part in constructing?

The new left was born out of fear, loathing, guilt and liberal progressive opportunism. When Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956 revealed Stalinist horrors, dissenting liberal-centrist voices in the Labour Party came to the fore. At this important juncture they had the perfect justification for arguing that nationalisation of key industries and governmental control of investment was too close to the discredited Soviet model, so only welfare was afforded sustained and consensual support. During the late 1960s Maoist turn in France, the French intellectuals who associated with workers discovered the working class's social conservatism and lingering prejudices. The ideas of figures such as Deleuze and Foucault, despite or perhaps because of their historical and economic illiteracy, leaked into Europe and across the Atlantic. This was the birth of post-structuralism, an essentially post-political cultural form in which the focus shifted entirely from class and political economy to an assortment of victim groups identified and ranked by the liberal middle class as worthy of emancipation. Strident calls for substantive social change from black and working-class radicals were quarantined and domesticated by the comforting promises issued by liberalism's atomistic social mobility model. Compromises and concessions were reframed as political victories. By the 1980s the very idea of politically organised socioeconomic reordering became anathema on the liberalised left as neoliberalism embarked on its journey towards largely unchecked economic globalisation and financialisation.

Following Anthony Crosland's (1956) unashamed elevation of liberal cultural values above basic working-class economic interests such as jobs, healthcare and old-age pensions, the British left began the process of shedding any working-class influence it might have

incorporated in the post-war era – mainly through the Labour Party’s affiliation with the Trades Unions and the selection of working-class MPs – and returning to its original form. After Beauvoir had declared women a ‘class’ in a struggle against patriarchy, various groups identified themselves as oppressed social classes. The working class became repositioned as one amongst many contenders, albeit at the back of the queue because of the progressives’ intense dislike of their residual prejudices. The cultural victim groups had legitimate grievances, but they shared few historical and socioeconomic interests and therefore had no common basis for politics. By the 1980s not only the left but politics in general became something else – post-structural identity politics disembedded from any project of deep political intervention aimed at democratising and perhaps transcending a capitalist economic system that was rapidly globalising its flows of finance, labour and commodities and escaping democratic political control.

Identity politics is an endlessly proliferating and ultimately unwinnable zero-sum game. As each day reveals newly perceived micro-aggressions and injustices, each gain made by a victim group – when transposed into liberal capitalism’s culture of atomised competitive individualism – is experienced as a loss by another. Where once the left tried to organize class struggle out of disorganised conflict, identity politics marginalises class struggle and revives disorganised conflict in its most virulent form. The future appears as a kaleidoscope of proliferating identitarian struggles on as many cultural fronts as we can imagine into being, which act together to constantly displace the possibility of a common political objective with an expanding vision of progress. It allows us to rediscover historical identities – or even those we can invent as we are encouraged to proliferate new selves – that should address every micro-injustice that was ever inflicted upon us, but in reality only those approved by the liberal middle class find their way into the public realm.

If the new world cannot be found, at least those who learn to compete effectively will receive compensation in this one. Neoliberalism will even allow the rediscovery of the class relation, but only in a cultural form that allows individuals to see clearly what they must do to improve their cultural competence and social mobility within the current structure. The old working class in its organised, political form, is to be firmly consigned to history’s dustbin. This process, we must understand, carried out by strident, dogmatic and exclusionary new leftists, was always a central goal for those who created and drove forward the neoliberal project (see

Slobodian, 2018). The ideological connections that exist between the liberal left and the neoliberal right are right there in front of us, should we care to look.

The new decree is that any potentially oppositional group should be ushered into the politically safe space of what Nancy Fraser (2013) calls 'progressive neoliberalism', dressed up to look edgy and cool as it performs its post-political tango with 'reactionary neoliberalism'. As Fraser warns, of course, too many everyday people facing austerity and insecurity are seeing this tango for the post-political distraction that it is. If 'progressive neoliberalism' continues to sneer at the 'basket of deplorables', an electorally important number of whom are not committed reactionaries but understandably cynical swing voters in chronically insecure economic situations, we risk the electoral capture of popular discontent by 'reactionary neoliberalism' (Fraser, 2018). This is not simply the 'return of fascism' but the emergence of a new right-wing, nationalistic political force of which thus far we have only a hazy understanding.

The left pushed identitarian progress for minorities into the foreground and economic security for the majority into the background (Winlow et al, 2015). The left's progressive activists could not accept the fact that the British working class – a multi-ethnic group throughout the industrial era – was predominantly culturally conservative, a sentiment rather than an analysis expressed by the reductionist term 'Labourism'. Yet, given the right circumstances for which the left should spend all its time and effort preparing, an electorally significant majority of the working class has proven itself to be susceptible to quite radical socioeconomic proposals. Convincing an electoral majority in the grip of post-crash austerity that a progressive economic project based on public control of finance and investment is feasible would have been possible in an ambience of shared interests – prosperity, security, sustainability, and so on. Instead the self-styled progressive liberal left relentlessly attacked the full spectrum of traditional institutions, beliefs, values and identities, justifying their symbolic violence with the grossly simplified sub-Gramscian claim that they 'culturally reproduce' the capitalist system.

Is this social conservatism simply a receptacle for ignorance, prejudice and capitalist reproduction? Or did it contain and reproduce ethical principles and institutions that could be reclaimed, redirected and applied to a new socioeconomic project? Are racism and sexism best approached amid insecurity and constant attacks on the person and his cultural heritage?

Are crude and hostile reductionist shaming concepts such as ‘whiteness’ or ‘toxic masculinity’ likely to persuade people to abandon their identities and change their thinking when there is no clear shared objective, only a vision of the future from which they have been erased? Is it a good idea to preach about the need to transcend consumerism and industrialism without being crystal clear and seeming to really care where alternative jobs and livelihoods might come from? Is it a good idea for the left to continue attacking the past and the present – with its ‘ruthless criticism of everything existing’ – without giving people a clue what a future with them in it might look like?

Overall, the history of the British left is a history of working-class exclusion and domination by fearful yet opportunistic liberal reformers. The working class was starved of the ability to develop an autonomous narrative to inform their politics, a sense of their own past and potential future based on their own experiences and structural perspective. Alienated from popular consciousness and experiences, Britain’s liberal left, comprised of individuals processed through dogmatic liberal educational programmes and fed divisive identity politics, is unlikely to win the day, even at a time when neoliberalism is in terminal decline and coughing up the most incompetent politicians in living memory.

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