This Conjuncture: For Stuart Hall

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When Stuart Hall died in 2014, many tributes and memorial activities were planned by organisations, institutions and publications that felt they owed him a debt. *New Formations* was no exception, and the editorial board spent some time reflecting on an appropriate tribute. Stuart himself, as many of us knew, had little interest in seeing his work codified or memorialised for its own sake. But there was one injunction that many of us were familiar with from that work, his example, and from frequent personal and political conversations with him.

The importance of thinking about 'the conjuncture', of 'getting the analysis right', was one that Stuart frequently emphasised to his students and interlocutors. The importance of mapping the specificity of the present, of situating current developments historically, of looking out for political threats and opportunities, was always at the heart of Stuart's conception both of 'cultural studies' as a specific intellectual practice, and of the general vocation of critical and engaged scholarship in the contemporary world. For cultural studies in particular, he understood this approach as steering a course between the two extremes that he saw as characterising too much work in the field. At one end of a continuum, he saw a tendency to theoreticism: overly abstract speculation, engaged in theoretical innovation for its own sake, rather than for any obvious analytical gain. At its most extreme this tendency manifests itself as a pure speculative philosophy that only uses cultural 'objects' as illustrations for its generalised theses. At the other end, he also decried an excessive particularism – textual analysis, descriptive ethnography – that made no effort to situate or explain its objects of study with reference to any wider set of social relations or historical tendencies. He was careful not to imply that all – or even most – contributions to cultural studies should be seeking to map an entire 'totality' of social relations at a given moment. But he did insist on the crucial importance of the question 'what does this have to do with everything else?' when examining any phenomenon, however minute.

This shouldn't be interpreted as a rigid prescription, and *New Formations* certainly publishes work that occupies every point on this continuum, and several others. *New Formations* is not specifically a journal of cultural studies, but it is one that prides itself on providing a home for the kind of work that Stuart valued, as well as many others. For this special issue, we decided to invite work that would reflect on or engage with Stuart's work in whatever way the contributors felt appropriate, but above all with reference to his frequent invocation of conjunctural analysis as an always-necessary and always-urgent

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task. Such was the range and quality of the contributions offered, we decided to assign two issues to this task (the second to be published a year or so after this one). So this is double-issue is the first of two volumes of *New Formations* (and so, technically, the first two of three issues), to be dedicated, in Stuart's honour, to the understanding of this conjuncture. In this introductory essay I will first consider the relationship between 'cultural studies' and 'conjunctural analysis' as specific types of intellectual practice, before proposing a specific analysis of our present 'conjuncture', in dialogue with the other contributors to this volume.

CULTURAL STUDIES AND CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS

'Conjunctural analysis' is sometimes said to be the core activity and objective of 'cultural studies'.[1] But what do these terms mean? While all of them require further elaboration, 'conjunctural analysis' can be broadly defined as the analysis of convergent and divergent tendencies shaping the totality of power relations within a given social field during a particular period of time. From this perspective, 'cultural studies' might be best understood as a species of political sociology, with an analytical emphasis on the study of semiotic practices and a heavy bias towards qualitative modes of analysis. Its primary objective is to map power relations of all kinds in in a given social field, with particular attention to the ways in which those relations are changing at a given moment.

1. Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the future tense*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, pp40-3.

Such a description of 'cultural studies' may well surprise many readers. Cultural Studies is a notoriously unstable field of inquiry, and a number of very different types of knowledge-production have been carried on under that name.[2] Much of what is both published and taught as 'cultural studies', especially in the context of anglophone graduate and postgraduate education, is more directly concerned with critical theory and speculative philosophy than with the systematic study of contemporary culture as such (and much of my own work has certainly fallen into this category). In such contexts, various texts, art objects or contemporary social phenomena are used either to illustrate philosophical arguments or as objects of casual, theoretically-informed commentary, but little attempt is often made to relate this commentary to any larger work of understanding the specificity of a given historical moment. My comments are not intended as dismissive or critical of such work, which is often insightful and valuable; their purpose is merely to acknowledge that readers who are familiar with such manifestations of 'cultural studies' may be surprised by my characterisation of the core objectives of the discipline. Nonetheless, this is a description of cultural studies that some of the influential figures to have played a role in defining the field would accede to (or would have done). A reader who was unfamiliar with that field may well then ask why exactly the name 'cultural studies' should be the one adopted to name it, given the repeated claims of its advocates that what

2. Jeremy Gilbert, *Anticapitalism and culture: radical theory and popular politics*, Oxford, Berg, 2008. (Hereafter *Anticapitalism and Culture*).

it really amounts to is a form of political analysis (albeit one that includes an expanded conception of 'the political' in comparison with mainstream anglophone 'political science'). Answering this question would require detailed attention to the precise ways in which university disciplines were organised in Britain during the 1960s, which I don't propose to go into here.[3] But it nonetheless raises the question of what exactly the place of 'culture' and 'the cultural' is, in the enterprise of cultural studies, if that enterprise is conceived as, in effect, a form of expanded political sociology. This issue will be the main focus of the first part of this article, but before addressing it directly, it will be necessary to clarify the role played by 'conjunctural analysis' within the discipline of cultural studies.

3. Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in postwar Britain: history, the New Left, and the origins of Cultural Studies*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2012 <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=637984> [accessed 2 May 2019].

Referring to cultural studies as a 'discipline' at all may exaggerate the coherence and distinctiveness of the field, but we can nonetheless identify a core tradition of theory and analysis going back to the late 1950s, associated with several of its most influential and programmatic practitioners, that has maintained a distinctive focus on something like conjunctural analysis (*Anticapitalism and Culture*, pp11-73). It is normal, in standard accounts of the development of cultural studies, to cite the British scholars Raymond Williams (1921-88) and Stuart Hall (1932-2014) as its key founders. The principle figure responsible for transmitting Hall's work within the North American academy, along with the very idea that that work constituted a coherent and complete intellectual enterprise, has been Hall's former student, founding editor of the journal *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg.[4] While it is Hall who popularised the terminology of 'conjuncture', borrowed largely from Gramsci, it is Grossberg who has gone furthest in formulating a precise account of what 'conjunctural analysis' actually involves, and what a conjuncture is. In the present volume, Grossberg writes in this issue that:

4. Stuart Hall, Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural studies 1983: A theoretical history*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016. (Hereafter *Cultural Studies 1983*).

> conjunctural analysis involves a strategic political choice – to work at a particular 'level of abstraction'. Conjunctures define an effective site – perhaps the most effective site – for political intervention aimed at redirecting the tides of social change, and perhaps the most propitious level at which intellectual and political analysis converge. This is the level of the social formation as some sort of totality, however fragile and temporary. It is located between the specificity of the moment and the long *duree* of the epoch (p42).

Grossberg's own work over several decades has been characterised by a series of analyses, focusing on key symptomatic features of contemporary American culture, each of which is understood as a phenomenon the analysis of which offers insights into the entire distribution of power relations, and the key transformations currently impacting on them, within the general social formation of the United States. One such phenomenon is popular music at the end of the 1980s, at a time when American rock music in particular,

was widely perceived to have entirely exhausted its historic 'countercultural' potential, instead becoming an entrenched element of capitalist culture at the end of the Reagan era.[5] In a later book Grossberg focusses on the status of 'kids' in the United States, as objects of attention (or inattention) on the part of corporations, the state, the media and other social institutions, all understood as an index of the specific ways in which neoliberalism was actually implemented and lived in its advanced stages.[6] In each case, it is the general ensemble of power relations producing the cultural phenomena under investigation that constitutes the 'level of abstraction' at which the analysis is carried out, and the relative durability or contingency of those power relations varies from case to case. For example, the condition of 'kids' in America in the 2000s is clearly a product both of long-term features of capitalism in general, of medium-term changes to practices and ideologies of child-rearing since the 1950s, and of much more recent developments in the labour market and the deployment of new technologies.

5. Lawrence Grossberg, *We gotta get out of this place: popular conservatism and postmodern culture*, New York, Routledge, 1992. (Hereafter *We gotta get out*).

6. Lawrence Grossberg, *Caught in the crossfire: kids, politics, and America's future*, Boulder, Paradigm Publishers, 2005. (Hereafter *Caught in the crossfire*).

ORIGINS OF CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS

Grossberg's practice of conjunctural analysis is derived directly from his reading of Hall's work, who in turn draws heavily on Gramsci (and, to a lesser extent Althusser).[7] However, as Grossberg acknowledges (in a footnote to the passage quoted above), deriving this terminology from Gramsci's original writings is tricky, as Gramsci himself refers to 'the conjuncture' and the 'conjunctural' in slightly different ways. All uses of the term, as Grossberg explains, posit the 'conjunctural' features of a situation as in some way less permanent than its most historically enduring, underlying conditions. But Gramsci sometimes uses the term 'conjunctural' to refer to highly ephemeral and entirely contingent elements of a situation, differentiated from the more significant 'organic' features of a situation.[8] At other times he refers to 'the strategic conjuncture' as a politically significant level at which historic situations must be analysed in terms of the relative strength of the different social interests competing within a given social field (p277).

The persistently relational and abstract nature of these definitions is such that it can be frustratingly difficult to determine exactly what the spatial and temporal scope of 'a conjuncture' might be taken to be. In fact this is a deliberate feature of the analytical approach deployed by Grossberg, partially derived from Hall: there is simply no prescriptive formula that can predict how long a particular, distinctive set of strategic relations will obtain in a given historic situation. Indeed, in a single collection of essays, Hall refers to 'conjunctures' that appear to have obtained for anything between four years and fifty years, [9] and states that:

> a conjuncture is not a slice of time, but can only be defined by the accumulation/condensation of contradictions, the fusion or merger – to use

7. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London, Verso, 2010, pp127–8. (Hereafter *For Marx*).

8. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith (trans.), London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p177. (Hereafter *Prison Notebooks*).

9. Stuart Hall, *The hard road to renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the left*, London, Verso, 1990. (Hereafter *Hard road to renewal*).

> Lenin's terms – of 'different currents and circumstances'. It is a 'moment', not a 'period' – over-determined in its principle (p130).

The definitive example of a 'conjunctural' analysis within cultural studies remains Stuart Hall et al's classic study *Policing the Crisis*.[10] This book opens with an analysis of a moral panic in the British press over an apparent, but statistically non-existent, increase in 'muggings' of white victims by young black men. It ultimately diagnoses this moral panic as part of a right-wing response to a crisis of the whole British social formation, as the 'post-war consensus' – in favour of a mixed economy, expansive welfare state, and only very gradual social liberalisation – breaks down under political, social and economic pressure. *Policing the Crisis* is now widely understood to have been the first major analysis of British culture, politics or society to have correctly discerned the emergence of a new cluster of social forces and discourses that would crystallise into public support for the 'new right' politics of Margaret Thatcher. As such, it is seen as having successfully analysed a major 'conjunctural' shift from the period of post-war consensus to the neoliberal era ushered in by Thatcherism. It made this diagnosis primarily by recognising the mugging panic as symptomatic of the emergence of a new 'common sense': a new set of widely diffused and shared understandings of the social world. This new common sense understood the end of the post-war consensus in terms of a deplorable breakdown in 'law and order', while also attributing the rise in unemployment both to 'greedy' trade-unions and to the personal fecklessness of economically unsuccessful individuals. The successful propagation of this common-sense through popular media and the tabloid press did not make the eventual victory of Thatcherism inevitable; but it did, as Hall argued a little later in *The Hard Road to Renewal*, make it highly likely.

10. Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the crisis: mugging, the state and law and order*, London, Macmillan, 1978. (Hereafter *PTC*).

So we can see here that culture – the general social domain of meaning-making – was central to Hall et al's analysis for two reasons. On the one hand, it was understood as a crucial site of *normalisation*, wherein particular sets of potentially-contentious assumptions are circulated and reinforced. On the other hand, it was also understood as a crucial site of *contestation* wherein different sets of ideas and assumption could challenge common-sense. In the case of *Policing the Crisis,* the story was essentially one of social-democratic common sense being thrown into crisis by the social, cultural and economic turbulence of the 1960s, and of the New Right defeating the New Left in the effort to propagate its 'common-sense' understanding of the nature of the crisis and the necessary solutions to it.

Exactly how long the new 'conjuncture' that emerged at that time is taken to have lasted depends on the analytical perspective of a particular analyst and the questions that they are trying to answer in the process. But it is significant that almost any answer to that question will depend upon the salience given to particular factors: cultural, political and economic. For example, it could be argued that in Britain the conjuncture opened by the crisis of mid-1970s

lasted only until the mid-1980s, when the total defeat of the political left and the labour movement by Thatcher was accompanied by the end of the intense burst of creative productivity characterising 'post-punk' culture in music, fashion, film and even television production.[11] It could equally be argued that it lasted until either the end of the Conservative Party's long reign in 1997, or until the final breakdown of the neoliberal consensus in 2015.[12] I will return to this question a little later. First, I want to address the issue of the status of 'culture' in this central founding text of 'cultural studies'.

11. Andy Beckett, *Promised you a miracle: Uk80-82*, London, Penguin Books, 2016; Simon Reynolds, *Rip it up and start again: post-punk 1978-84*, London, Faber, 2005.

12. Jeremy Gilbert, 'Corbynism and its futures', *Near Futures Online*, 1, 1 (2016) <http://nearfuturesonline.org/corbynism-and-its-futures/>.

THE ANALYSIS OF CULTURE

In *Policing the Crisis*, several types of cultural analysis play a significant role. The book's study of the press moral panic on mugging takes the form of a conventional media content analysis, the results of which are contrasted with the statistical reality of violent street crime in the UK during the years under investigation. However, this is supplemented by a condensed narrative history of key developments in British politics and culture since the 1940s, and by a keen critical sensitivity to current trends in popular culture, so that a general picture of the tone and nature of shifts in British culture, such as the rising authoritarian backlash against the social liberalisation of the 1960s, can be discerned. All of these are analysed, with reference to the changing political economy of the UK, in terms largely derived from Gramsci and Althusser, who are concerned with the role of culture as a site of political contestation and as a mechanism for the reproduction of class relations. Most importantly, culture is understood as the terrain upon which battles for the content of widely-accepted 'common sense' are fought, and it is assumed that such battles are crucial to determining overall historical outcomes. 'Culture', then, is understood as the domain within which most members of a society form their conceptions both of themselves and of the wider social world and historical moment, and these are understood to be crucial issues in the analysis of political processes, outcomes and possibilities. However, it is important to distinguish here between an idealist account of 'common sense' and the historical materialist approach that was always informed mainstream cultural studies. The former would see history as essentially a series of struggles over ideas: world-views, religions, etc. A materialist perspective will always see these conflicts as ultimately being between different sets of material interests, even if struggles at the level of ideas could ultimately have determining effects upon those material interests (for example, when neoliberal propaganda succeeds in dissuading large number of workers from joining unions).

In fact, almost by definition, 'conjunctural' analysis as practiced by Hall et al. does not prescribe in advance how much weight is to be given to 'cultural', economic, political, social or technological factors in making an overall analysis of a given social formation or period.[13] Although this might sound frustratingly vague to, say, political or social scientists, it is worth reflecting that

13. Jeremy Gilbert, 'What does democracy feel like? Form, function, affect, and the materiality of the sign', in L. Dahlberg and S. Phelan (eds), *Discourse theory and critical media politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011 <http://link.springer.com/10.1057/9780230343511_4> [accessed 12 June 2019].

such openness to the possibility of giving different weight to different factors is a normal expectation of professional historians approaching particular periods and places, even when they have specific questions and hypotheses in mind. Hall himself occasionally referred to the importance of 'the historical mode' of analysis, and it is striking that the classic text that perhaps most directly anticipated and influenced Hall's style of 'conjunctural analysis' is not one by Gramsci or Althusser: it is Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.[14] What Hall saw in this text was an exemplary instance of the recent past being analysed in the properly historical mode, with the greatest possible attention to the details of the precise socio-political situations being described. Famously, this text opens with an analysis of the way in which revolutionary and radical movements borrow from the language and imagery of earlier historical moments, and finally closes with a precise analysis of the changed field of political, economic, social and ideological power relationships in France in 1852, at the end of the process that began in 1848.

14. Karl Marx, *The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985.

The Eighteenth Brumaire is often remembered as one of Marx's most 'journalistic' works, and the one where he most clearly undertakes the role of the narrative historian. This remains an important precedent for cultural studies, and narrative historical accounts of recent history have remained a crucial feature of attempts at conjunctural analysis modelled on Hall's. As such, 'cultural' developments are often woven in with political, economic and social elements as they might be in standard historical accounts of any given period, while often being given more prominence than would be expected in more conventional social-scientific accounts.

Of course 'culture' is itself a complex and slippery term with multiple potential meanings.[15] Within cultural studies the term is normally used in two related but differentiable ways. On the one hand, it is used in an anthropological sense to refer to 'the elements making up a whole way of life' and the particular systems and practices of meaning-making that are deployed by various social groups in multiple contexts. In this sense, 'culture' can be analysed using the same set of methodologies used by sociologists and anthropologists: ethnography, participant observation, interview, discourse analysis, etc.[16]

15. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985.

16. Raymond Williams, *Culture and society, 1780-1950*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1958. (Hereafter *Culture and Society*).

But in practice perhaps the most distinctive analytical technique of cultural studies is its close critical attention to various objects, texts and artefacts of 'popular culture', or expressive culture more broadly (including both commercial popular culture and the fine arts): from TV shows to fashion accessories to popular music to food. In this, again, the actual practice of cultural studies is often closer to the work of historians in analysing archive documents, art objects and material cultural artefacts, than it is to that of any other group of scholars. Although practitioners of cultural studies would normally see such work as a form of 'cultural analysis', it actually derives directly from the institutional origins of cultural studies in the 'English Literature' departments of the 1950s, and it is notable that a certain work of

cultural *criticism* remains a characteristic feature of cultural studies that plays a key role in conjunctural analysis: evaluating, rather than merely describing, cultural texts, albeit often in political rather than merely aesthetic terms. For example, for Grossberg, and for other key practitioners of cultural studies such as Paul Gilroy, partially evaluative claims as to the relative dynamism, creativity and originality of the outputs of particular music artists have at times, at least implicitly, played an important role in their analyses.[17] Gilroy's analyses of historical and contemporary formations of African-American culture would lack much of their analytical force without their convincing evaluative comments on the relative affective power of certain musical outputs at certain times.

17. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*, London, Verso, 1993; Paul Gilroy, *Between camps: nations, cultures and the allure of race*, London, Routledge, 2004.

WHY 'CULTURE'?

This attention to culture, and commitment to criticism, is driven by several overlapping motivations. Contrary to what many outside the field often assume, what it is *not* driven by is any assumption that historical outcomes can ever be exclusively or primarily attributes to conflicts between ideologies or 'world views'. 'Culture' for cultural studies, is always produced by material relations, even if it can also impinge directly upon them.

In the earliest stages of cultural studies' development, one motivation was to resist the mid-century academic emphasis on 'high' culture as being the only type of meaning-making to be worthy of academic study, and the consequent tendency to isolate 'cultural' objects from their historical and social contexts while studying them. But this was never a matter either of just adding a socio-historical dimension to the study of specific texts, or of merely defending the dignity of the popular. Rather, even the very earliest iterations of 'cultural studies' were motivated by a conception of 'culture' as a kind of proxy for the idea of the 'social totality', and by the desire to take a whole ensemble of social and expressive relations as an object of investigation.[18] Raymond Williams' foundational study *Culture and Society* is a kind of literary genealogy of attempts to think through the relationships between 'culture' and 'society' in English literature since the early nineteenth century, that was already deeply concerned with the question of how to engage in a type of socio-cultural analysis that could make sense of a whole constellation of social relations at a given moment. From that moment through to Grossberg's most recent methodological reflections, cultural studies has sought analytical methods that can balance this level of intellectual ambition with a healthy scepticism regarding the possibility of ever constructing a fully exhaustive account of any given social 'totality'. The concept of 'conjuncture' came to play a key role in helping to crystallise this aim, but the field's very emphasis on 'culture' was already motivated by much the same objective.

18. Georg Lukacs, *History and class consciousness*, London, Merlin Press, 1975, p197.

Another key motivation for this emphasis on culture has been the types of power relationships that cultural studies has set out to map and analyse,

and the difficulty of analysing them without reference to 'culture' both in the sense of 'a whole way of life' and in the sense of the products of the expressive arts. For example, since the mid-1970s feminist commitments have been central to the analytical enterprise of cultural studies. But actual changes to the nature of gendered power relations are notoriously difficult to quantify or analyse objectively, and it is hard to imagine anyone attempting to make any such analysis – in a modern, media-saturated culture – without reference to the specific and changing ways in which gender is represented, and in which gender norms are reproduced or challenged, in film, television advertising and popular music. For example, McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* combines cultural criticism (of, for example, the *Bridget Jones* phenomenon) with political analysis and interpretation of sociological and economic data to provide a comprehensive account of the state of gender relations under conditions of advanced neoliberalism.[19] It is difficult to imagine any other form of evidence substituting for texts such as *Bridget Jones Diary* and *Sex and the City*, in their ability to index certain changes in public moods, priorities and desires regarding the relationship of women to the labour market and consumer culture.

19. Angela McRobbie, *The aftermath of feminism*, London, Sage, 2008.

Cultural studies has always been concerned with culture not simply as an aggregation of texts to be decoded, but as indexing important shifts in the way that social, political and economic processes are actively experienced, at a subjective and microsocial scale, as well as in the wider public sphere. Getting to grips with this issue has often required innovative and extended considerations of the psychosocial dimensions of human culture: from Williams' analyses of 'structures of feeling',[20] to the engagements made by Hall and others with Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis (at times inspired by Fanon, or Althusser),[21] to more recent approaches inspired by a Deleuzian understanding of 'affect' as a key dimension of social and political experience. In this issue, for example, Vicky Lebeau brings to bear some highly illuminating, but generally under-used conceptual tools for this purpose: ideas drawn from the work if the English object-relations psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott. In her extraordinary exploratory essay, Lebeau uses these tools to examine Ken Loach's landmark film *I, Daniel Blake* as both a powerful expression of the psychosocial effects of contemporary 'austerity', and as an intervention into public debates around it. In the process she illuminates significant features both of the experience of contemporary power relations and of the ways in which that experiences is symbolised, represented, processed and circulated. 'The conjuncture', from this perspective, is composed of specific configurations of emotion, attachment and trauma as much as economic and institutional relationships, and its vicissitudes are registered on corporeal and psychic planes as well as well as those of public institutions. It is for this reason, in large part, that cultural studies has so often turned to psychoanalysis when trying to analytically operationalise the founding claim of women's liberation: that the 'personal' is always already

20. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and literature*, London, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp128-35.

21. James Donald, *Psychoanalysis and cultural theory: thresholds*, London, Macmillan, 1990.

political. By exactly the same token, as Lebeau's analysis demonstrates, we cannot understand the political without understanding that it is also always experienced as profoundly and intimately personal.

THE PROBLEM OF PERIODISATION

In *The Aftermath of Feminism* Angela McRobbie describes and analyses emergent forms of sexual culture in a particular historical context: that characterised by the hegemony of those socially-liberal forms of neoliberalism that succeeded the period of New Right authoritarianism and social conservatism. This serves as a useful illustration of the fact that although, as we have seen, conjunctural analysis is never a straightforward exercise in periodisation, it is always concerned with the identification of continuities and discontinuities on multiple scales. The particular dis/continuity to which I just referred – between socially-conservative and socially liberal variants of neoliberalism – has been a particularly salient concern for analysts of British politics and culture in the wake of Hall's classic analyses of incipient and early Thatcherism.

A very interesting debate between Hall and some of his colleagues took place in the early 2000s, around precisely the question of how far the election of the New Labour government did or did not represent a significant break within this history. At a conference at London's Tate Modern to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the publication of Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, American political theorist Nancy Fraser took issue with both Hall and Mouffe characterising Blair's political project as merely an extension of Thatcherism.[22] This was a polemical claim that was consistent with their refusal to endorse New Labour, and with Hall's repeated criticisms of it for having adopted neoliberal principles in formulating its rhetoric and political programme.[23]The political significance of Hall's rhetoric was to emphasise the neoliberal continuity between New Labour and Thatcherism at a time when the concept of 'neoliberalism' was still not widely understood even within academic circles in the UK.

However, as Fraser pointed out, while politically understandable, this characterisation of New Labour as wholly continuous with Thatcherism was neither analytically satisfying, nor consistent with Hall's famous emphasis on the importance of the politics of culture.[24] There were clear differences between the New Right's tendencies to social conservatism and English nationalism, and New Labour's explicit embrace of social liberalism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, that could not be written off as purely 'cosmetic' if the specificity of New Labour's political project were to be understood. As I argued myself a few years later, again in direct response to Hall, the specificity of that project marked a distinctive new phase, within which the hegemony of neoliberalism was no longer dependent on its articulation with socially conservative discourse or on the ageing, socially-conservative constituencies that Thatcherism had always relied upon for political legitimacy.[25] Again,

22. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, London, Verso, 1985.

23. Stuart Hall, 'New Labour's double-shuffle', *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 27, 4, 2005, pp319–335.

24. www.radicalphilosophy.com/conference-report/hegemony-and-socialist-strategy-tate-modern-london-3-june-2001

25. Jeremy Gilbert, 'The Second Wave: The Specificity of New Labour Neo-Liberalism', *Soundings*, 26, 26, 2004, pp25-45. https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/26/second-wave-specificity-of-new-labour-neo-liberalism

cultural analysis was crucial in marking these differences: it was New Labour's continuity and resonance with key tendencies in late 1990s popular culture - for example, the widespread celebration of social liberalism coupled with the general de-politicisation of youth culture - that was a precondition for its political success, and that marked the clear end of the political and cultural hegemony of the New Right.[26]

On the basis of these observations, I would argue that the UK (indeed, the entire UK-US Atlantic anglosphere) has gone through two major 'conjunctures' during the period of neoliberal hegemony. The period 1975-1985 was characterised by intense social and political conflict following the Labour government's capitulation to International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands for neoliberal reforms in 1975, eventually culminating in the abject defeat of left-wing forces by the Reagan and Thatcher governments, relying on highly authoritarian means to achieve this end: including the effective militarisation of the civilian police in the UK.[27] The period that followed saw the gradual weakening of the socially authoritarian component of the neoliberal programme, the historic deregulation of the financial and housing sectors and the emergence of the culture of the 'long 90s',[28] wherein historically unprecedented levels of social liberalism and the experience of living through the internet revolution coincided with a marked decline in popular creativity, and a general sense of cultural stasis that has persisted arguably until the present time (when, for example, the most popular TV show on UK Netflix is still the iconic 1990s American sitcom, *Friends*).[29] The bigger context for this period of cultural continuity was the globally hegemonic position secured by American finance capital and Silicon Valley as the leading fractions of global capital, and the lack of any serious challenge to their authority throughout this period. But its consistency and specificity are best registered in the observation of these key cultural tendencies.

26. Timothy Bewes and Jeremy Gilbert, *Cultural capitalism politics after New Labour*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2000.

27. Francis Beckett and David Hencke, *Marching to the fault line: the 1984 miners' strike and the death of industrial Britain*, London, Constable, 2009.

28. Jeremy Gilbert, 'The Long 90s is over', 2015 <https://jeremygilbertwriting.wordpress.com/2015/09/14/the-long-90s-is-over/>.

29. 'Friends is still the most watched show on Netflix | JOE.co.uk' <https://www.joe.co.uk/entertainment/netflix-friends-194366> [accessed 2 May 2019].

STRATEGIC MAPPING

My purpose here is not to convince the reader of the accuracy of my claims or analyses, but merely to illustrate the role that certain kinds of cultural analysis play in the broad project of 'conjunctural analysis'. 'But', the impatient reader may still be asking 'what, ultimately, is the point of all this?' If conjunctural analysis is not an exercise in authoritative periodisation, and lacks any clear criteria for selecting its objects of analysis, what is the point of it at all?

The aim of conjunctural analysis is always to map a social territory, in order to identify possible sites of political intervention. Such interventions need not actually be made, or be made on behalf of any particular political project or tendency, for the analysis to have validity; but its potential utility to anyone wanting to intervene in a given situation is the key criteria according to which conjunctural analyses can be judged. For example my remarks about the current condition of youth culture would have to be placed alongside

the very strong evidence for the breakdown of neoliberal hegemony within mainstream British politics in recent years, as the neoliberal consensus has given way to a sharp polarisation between a newly radicalised Labour Party, an extreme English nationalist wing of the Conservative Party and an increasingly isolated and impotent neoliberal 'centre', all driven by an apparently dramatic shift to the left amongst the under-50s.[30] What can we make of a situation in which a surge of political radicalism amongst the young appears to be accompanied by little of the cultural experimentalism that has traditionally been associated with such political waves?

30. Keir Milburn, *Generation left, radical futures*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019.

These observations might well serve as a corrective to any analysis of contemporary British politics that placed too much emphasis on young people's ability or willingness to break with neoliberalism; or they might be interpreted as revealing a huge latent appetite amongst the young for cultural forms that could correspond with the dramatic shift to the left recently observed among young British and American voters. There is no space here for a full exploration of these alternative interpretations, but my own view is that there are significant historical precedents for political radicalism 'running ahead' of cultural radicalism (for example, the Russian Revolution arguably preceded a period of intense aesthetic and intellectual creatively in 1920s Russia), and that the evidence just cited suggests that we are in a similar moment now in the UK; not in the sense that the current situation in the UK is in any sense 'pre-revolutionary', but in the sense that, following decades of neoliberal entrenchment across the arts, media and popular culture, the material conditions for an intense renewal of cultural creativity could only be created by some significant political gains by democratic forces. At the same time, the potential for developing forms of popular culture with an explicitly radical political orientation seems stronger at the present time than at any since the early 1980s, despite such forms being arguably yet to appear.

I make these remarks partly in order to correct a common misconception as to the presumed relationship between 'culture' and 'politics' within the tradition of cultural studies. A recent popular slogan of the American 'alt-right' is (attributed to right-wing ideologue Andrew Breitbart): 'politics is downstream from culture', meaning that 'culture wars' – struggles over moral issues, 'values' and ideological conceptions of the world is in some sense prior to struggles over politics. It is often assumed by those with no, or only passing, familiarity with cultural studies, that this is the view derived by figures like Hall from their study of sources such as Grasmci.[31] But this is simply mistaken. If anything, the reverse is true. 'Culture' for cultural studies is only ever one field of political struggle among others, one that never stops intersecting and interacting with local, municipal, regional, national and international struggles (both institutional and extra-institutional), with economic processes and with histories of technological change. The relative importance of culture as understood by Breitbart – or even of the expressive arts, within specific historical situations – simply cannot be determined in

31. Angela Nagle, *Kill all normies: online culture wars from 4Chan And Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, London, Zero Books, 2017.

advance of the attempt to analyse those strategic situations.

We can derive a very good example of how unpredictable and politically contingent such issues can be from recent British political history. The vote for Brexit in 2016 was widely interpreted as indexing the full hegemony of the parochial, socially-conservative nationalism associated with the right-wing press, and as therefore presaging electoral disaster for a Labour Party led by controversial libertarian socialist, Jeremy Corbyn. The Brexit vote was interpreted as a rejection of the cosmopolitan culture of the cities, where most of Corbyn's electoral base was located, and it was generally assumed right up until the day of the June 2017 election that Labour would lose badly. However, on the day many 'Leave'-voting voters actually voted for Labour's radical social-democratic programme, despite intense hostility from the press. This suggests that their rejection of EU membership may well have been motivated less than was assumed, by fierce hostility to urban cosmopolitan culture, and more by pure economic self-interest, channelled by the sincere belief in a narrative that blamed high levels of immigration for their declining economic prospects. In this instance, there is no question that understanding and analysing the situation would require close attention to the domain of 'common-sense' and to 'cultural' issues such as the sources of voters' information about economics, and the types of facts and metaphors to which they are exposed; but the assumption that a purely 'cultural' set of prejudices and priorities were shaping their political decisions was shown to be at best highly dubious. The further political conclusion to be drawn from this might be that support for Brexit and for anti-immigration politics could be severely weakened if voters were presented with a coherent alternative explanation for their economic situation and a coherent alternative plan for remedying it.

Ultimately, then, the place of 'culture' in conjunctural analysis is in some senses invariable, in others highly variable. No attempt at analysing a specific socio-historical situation can avoid engaging with the question of how the human agents involved in it understand their position, their actions and their world. Cultural studies will almost always approach this question with specific reference to the question of what textual, visual, sonic or ritual practices serve either to reproduce or to contest widely-accepted versions of such understandings, and how these are shaped by or have the potential to re-shape underlying social power relations. It will very often use techniques of close analysis in order make some kind of evaluative comments on the aesthetic merits and status of influential, popular or historically-significant texts or cultural objects, but it will only ever do this for the purpose of furthering the analysis of the overall existing and emergent power relations.

But ultimately cultural studies makes no final claims as to the place of 'culture' in any given conjuncture. The objective of cultural studies – and this is why conjunctural analysis is central to it – is not merely the understanding of culture as such. It is always, rather, the understanding of a

'strategic conjuncture…of the theatre of struggle' and the points of possible intervention that progressive (or even conservative) forces might make in it (*Prison Notebooks*, p217).

THIS CONJUNCTURE

In this volume, Lawrence Grossberg writes that

> Conjunctural analysis demands that one construct these two maps – a material-structural map and an affective map – simultaneously, as both relatively autonomous and as always articulated. It must tell us how such lived organisations are made, remade and re-organised, often strategically but always contingently and without guaranteed success (p62).

Across the various pieces collected here, just such a mapping is attempted at various scales and with emphasis on various localities and axes of experience. Several, naturally enough, pay particular attention to the current and recent conditions in the United Kingdom.

Any attempt to map and understand the current politico-cultural conjuncture in the UK would have to start from this peculiar conjunction of highly-unexpected events. Alongside the results of both the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2017 general election, we would have to take into account a range of other phenomena and developments. The 2015 general election had already witnessed one political earthquake: the decimation of Labour in its traditional electoral stronghold of Scotland, as voters switched to supporting the Scottish National Party (SNP), just months after roundly rejecting their call to vote for independence from the UK in a national referendum. At the same time, the most striking political development of 2019 has been the irruption of public support for Extinction Rebellion (ER): a campaign of non-violent civil disobedience with ambitious aims to both force government to face up to the climate emergency and ultimately (according to certain of its spokespeople)[32] to replace the entire UK system of government with a system of 'citizens assemblies'. Alongside a surge in support for the Green Party,[33] this serves as a powerful reminder that ecological and environmental factors not traditionally considered to be significant conjunctural factors must be taken into account for the serious analysis of many contexts. All this takes place in the context of a significant shift in the organisation of global capitalism: the extraordinary wealth and power of the giant platform corporations has passed a certain threshold of public visibility in recent years, provoking growing anxiety and a wave of critical commentary.[34] Directly related to this development, the ubiquitous take-up of social media is without doubt the most striking change to everyday culture and systems of communication of the past decade, on every conceivable scale. At the level of popular culture, the broad context is characterised by the persistence of 'long 90's' culture,

32. *#49 Roger Hallam on Extinction Rebellion* <https://soundcloud.com/poltheoryother/49-roger-hallam-on-extinction-rebellion> [accessed 12 June 2019].

33. 'European election results: Green parties surge as 'Green Wave' hits EU | The Independent' <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/european-election-result-greens-green-wave-spd-germany-a8931351.html> [accessed 12 June 2019].

34. Shoshana Zuboff, *The age of surveillance capitalism: the fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*, London, Profile Books, 2019; Nick Srnicek, *Platform capitalism*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2017.

interrupted by occasional bursts of explicitly politicised protest: for example *I, Daniel Blake* and the 'Grime4 Corbyn' phenomenon that saw London-based 'grime' artists advocate openly for Corbyn at the 2017 election, albeit without any apparent long-term impact on the generally apolitical nature of 'grime' music and its attendant scenes. [35]

If we ask what links all of these developments, and what all of them together seem to index and indicate, then the answer seems fairly clear. What the results of the Brexit referendum and Corbyn's election as Labour leader, together with his unexpected success at the 2017 general election, have in common is that they each constitute an active rejection of a particular political consensus and the social groups most closely associated with its propagation: politicians, journalists, and those members of the professional and managerial classes existing in the closest social proximity to them. That consensus has been maintained consistently by every government of whatever party, since the failure of John Major's 'Back to Basics' campaign in the early 1990s. 'Back to Basics' was a confused attempt to draw a line under Thatcher's socio-economic radicalism, while retaining her rhetorical commitment to social authoritarianism.[36] It was widely perceived as an embarrassing failure to resonate with any discernible feature of the public mood, and coincided with Bill Clintons' elevation as leader of the free world, promoting a new 'Third Way' synthesis of social liberalism with intensified neoliberal economics (in fact this programme had already been pioneered by Labour governments in both New Zealand and Australia since the early 1980s; but there was little awareness of this fact outside of professional political circles in either the US or the UK). The Third Way represented in its most explicit form, an ideology of socially-liberal, cosmopolitan neoliberalism that would inform all subsequent UK governments up to and including those of David 'heir to Blair' Cameron.[37] It very clearly represented the interests and outlook of an increasingly globalised managerial elite,[38] and remained apparently unchallengeable as late as 2015, when Labour leader Ed Miliband was widely criticised as having moved too far to the left in proposing a new regulatory framework for privatised energy providers.[39]

Miliband's attempt to turn Labour in a mildly social-democratic direction had almost no support amongst his parliamentary party, while representing nothing like a sufficiently radical break with Blairism to enthuse the activist constituency that would flood into the party later in 2015, in support of Jeremy Corbyn. It was also not radical enough to prevent the collapse of Labour's vote in Scotland during the election of that year, at the end of an extraordinary political sequence in that nation. The independence referendum campaign of 2014 had not produced the result that nationalists hoped for, but it had effected a remarkable crystallisation of the terms of public debate north of the border. By the time of the referendum in September 2014, the key question organising much public debate was not simply which outcome would best maximise the political and institutional sovereignty of the country, but which outcome

35. Jessica Perera, 'The politics of Generation Grime', *Race & Class*, 60, 2, 2018, pp82-93. See also: https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/68/grime-labour

36. 'Angela McRobbie, 'Folk devils fight back', NLR I/203, January-February 1994', *New Left Review* <https://newleftreview.org/issues/I203/articles/angela-mcrobbie-folk-devils-fight-back> [accessed 12 June 2019].

37. Brian Wheeler, 'The David Cameron story', 9 May 2015, section Election 2015 <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-2015-32592449> [accessed 12 June 2019]; Stuart McAnulla, 'Heirs to Blair's third way? David Cameron's triangulating conservatism', *British Politics*, 5, 3, 2010, pp286-314.

38. 'The Crisis of Cosmopolitanism - Stuart Hall Foundation' <http://stuarthallfoundation.org/library/the-crisis-of-cosmopolitanism/> [accessed 23 April 2019]; Ron Formisano, *American Oligarchy: The Permanent Political Class*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2017.

39. 'Labour leader Ed Miliband shows his true colours... RED', *The Sun*, 2013 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/politics/1031988/ed-miliband-shows-his-true-colours-red/> [accessed 12 June 2019].

would offer the best hope of a decisive rejection of neoliberal hegemony in Scotland, and the opportunity to implement an authentically social-democratic programme.[40] The Scottish National Party was widely perceived as representing such a programme more consistently than the Scottish Labour Party (whose MPs were heavily skewed towards the Blairite wing of the UK party), a fact that offers the only reasonable explanation for the SNP triumph at the 2015 election, just months after the electorate's decisive rejection of their signature policy: independence. In Scotland at least, the neoliberal consensus was comprehensively rejected. A comparable process saw half a million voters (mostly in England and Wales) join the Labour Party in order to vote for Jeremy Corbyn as leader, first in September 2015 and then again a year later, following an attempt by the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) to remove him. Again, this must be seen as a clear rejection of the widespread consensus according to which even the Labour Party and its leadership could not be seen to depart very dramatically from neoliberal norms.

40. For example, this has been the consistent core argument made by the pro-independence lobby group, Common Weal: https://commonweal.scot/big-ideas.

The vote for Brexit in 2016 was very widely interpreted as a rejection of the globalising, multicultural, neoliberal consensus and of the social and political elites whose world-view it represented, albeit this time a rejection that largely took the form of a nationalist politics, hostile to immigration, refugees and multiculturalism. As John Clarke writes in this volume:

> The Brexit campaign assembled a potent repertoire of populist, nationalist, anti-migrant and anti-European elements, sewn into place by threads of xenophobia and racism, that centred on a promise to *restore* the nation – putting the Great back into 'Great Britain' – and offering a sense of potency ('taking back control'). Leave voters were invited to see themselves as the neglected core of a nation, the 'ordinary, decent people' (Nigel Farage) who had been taken for granted and abused by a metropolitan-cosmopolitan elite. Such ordinary people were invited to see themselves as inhabiting a culture of decency and toleration ('British values') that had been ruthlessly exploited by migrants whose capacity to enjoy the fruits of the United Kingdom (including picking them, as seasonal labourers) was being sustained by the EU's commitment to Freedom of Movement… a critical element in this mobilisation was the possibility of expressing emotional states: loss, frustration, anger and rage. The referendum – itself a political form significantly different from electoral politics and its associated party affiliations – provided a means of dissenting, of saying No: as Insa Koch puts it, 'a chance to reject government tout court and to say no to a system of representative democracy that many have come to experience in punitive terms (p144).

This narrative can be compared with that of the French sociologist Didier Eribon, whose autobiographical essay *Returning to Reims* interprets the rise in

support for the far-right amongst French working-class voters as a symptom of their rejection of a cosmopolitan elite culture that they associate with the anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian tendencies of advanced neoliberalism.[41] Theresa May's response to this development, during the first months of her tenure as Conservative leader, following David Cameron's resignation after the referendum result, was herself to embrace Brexit, with a rhetoric that tried to connect with working-class conservatism while turning its back on the cosmopolitan culture represented by Blair and Cameron.[42] The result was a very significant increase in Conservative vote share, as right-wing voters of the pro-Brexit UK Independence Party (UKIP) returned to the Tory fold, but a far more surprising increase in Labour's, for reasons that psephologists are still debating.[43] The best evidence for Labour's electoral performance – despite the open hostility of much of the senior party bureaucracy at that time to Corbyn's leadership[44] – is that that an unprecedented mobilisation of new activists was made possible by the innovative use of platform technologies, enabling tens of thousands of campaigners to mobilise at minimal cost to the party, while social media and YouTube enabled the dissemination of pro-Corbyn propaganda by enthusiastic supporter groups, again at very low costs.[45] At the same time, evidence suggests that a large proportion of the UKIP vote had, as suggested above, been motivated by an inchoate and economically-motivated rejection of elite neoliberalism that could just as well be expressed by support for Corbyn as by endorsement of the nationalist right. Still further, Corbyn's labour received strong support from middle-class opponents of Brexit, motivated by the perception that a Labour government would probably implement a less severe form of exit from the European Union, but presumably also by the growing perception that persistent austerity was undermining the life-chances of young adults even from affluent professional backgrounds.

THE CRISIS OF THE POLITICAL CLASS

This final point is crucial, because it brings us back to the somewhat longer historical context within which these critical political events occurred. Arguably, the authority of the professional political class that had emerged since the 1980s had never been predicated on widespread acceptance of neoliberal norms, so much as a reluctant deference to them on the part of a public who saw little viable alternative, and who were willing to so defer provided that overall opportunities for private consumption continued to expand.[46] They did so, with periodic interruptions, for most of the period 1980-2008, as the expansion of consumer culture, the growing availability of unsecured and property-backed consumer debt, the exponential growth in cheap Chinese imports and the rise of affordable air travel enabled a material lifestyle for most people that would have seemed luxurious as late as the 1960s. The precipitous fall in real earnings following the 2008 financial crisis

41. Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, Los Angeles, MIT Press, 2013

42. Theresa May, 'Theresa May's conference speech in full', *The Telegraph*, 5 October 2016.

43. John Curtice, 'General Election 2017: A new two-party politics?', *Political Insight*, 8, 2 2017, 4–8.

44. SKWAWKBOX, 'Excl: Lab HQ DID deactivate JC team passes on election night – and more', *The SKWAWKBOX*, 2017 <https://skwawkbox.org/2017/07/14/excl-lab-hq-did-deactivate-jc-team-passes-on-election-night-and-more/> [accessed 12 June 2019].

45. Jeremy Gilbert 'An epochal election: welcome to the ere of platform politics' https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/epochal-election-welcome-to-era-of-platform-politics/.

46. For example, the British Social Attitude surveys have rarely if ever shown anything like widespread acceptance for neoliberal assumptions and norms (for example, the assumption that rewards are fairly reflective of effort in a capitalist market economy): http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk.

put an end to this long period of expanded and intensified consumption,[47] undermining the terms upon which many citizens had deferred to a neoliberal political class whose moral legitimacy they had never accepted. From ageing socially-conservative voters who had never been happy with the multicultural, sexually-permissive culture of advanced neoliberalism, to young graduates and public-sector workers of all ages whose prospects and lifestyles had been decimated by neoliberalism and post-2008 austerity, there was no longer any reason to accept the authority of the cosmopolitan, neoliberal political elite. In his article, Clarke shows how the Brexit vote seemed to express and intensify a profound sense of loss amongst many social constituencies: not only a loss of national sovereignty and imperial pride, but 'a sense of loss of 'the social'. As David Lammy MP argued following the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, 'people want the social back'.[48]

In fact a comparable sense of loss could be said to have animated the responses of many political groups both to the Brexit vote and to the conditions that produced it. The apparent end of the neoliberal cosmopolitan consensus marked a significant loss for at least two distinct politico-cultural constituencies. On the one hand, those groups who have since the 1970s been the most reliable supporters of the political left – public-sector workers, unionised workers, poor and middle-income city-dwellers – have been offered one major compensation throughout that period for the loss of status, autonomy and resources that neoliberalism has inflicted on them. That compensation was the social liberalisation, along with official repudiation of sexism, racism and homophobia by public institutions that so many of their antecedents had agitated for since the nineteenth century.[49] The return of nationalist social conservatism and authoritarian populism threatens to undermine those fragile gains without reversing any of their accompanying losses. At the same time, the group for whom both Corbynism and Brexit represents a catastrophic loss is the neoliberal political elite themselves, along with those sections of wider society most closely aligned with them. For these strata, the end of their hegemonic status constitutes an existential crisis, which they lack the intellectual resources to make sense of. Perhaps the most obvious symptom of this incapacity has been the absolute ineffectuality of their attempts to respond to their situation. Making no effort whatsoever to address a wider public whose views on either Brexit or Corbyn they might attempt to change, this elite has confined itself to attacking Corbyn relentlessly in a press that fewer and fewer people actually read, while demanding that he embrace a political position (committed to reversing the Brexit referendum result) that they themselves have consistently failed to popularise. The farcically failed attempt to launch a new centrist party – 'Change UK' – has entirely undermined the credibility of Blairite politicians such as Chukka Umunna who was, until 2017, being widely tipped as a future Labour prime minister and has now joined the Liberal Democrats.

47. 'How have wages changed over the past decade?', *Full Fact* <https://fullfact.org/economy/how-have-wages-changed/> [accessed 13 June 2019]; 'Wages and salaries annual growth rate % - Office for National Statistics' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/timeseries/kgq2/qna> [accessed 13 June 2019].

48. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/02/david-lammy-mp-grenfell-tower-interview-blair-brown-black

49. Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: a life of liberty and love*, London; Verso, 2009.

50. Melinda Cooper, *Family values: between neoliberalism and the new social conservatism*, London, Zone Books, 2017.

51. Stuart Hall, 'The march of the neoliberals', *Guardian*, 21 September 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/sep/12/march-of-the-neoliberals, accessed 21/07/2018.

52. For example: the housing

Thus far, however, this elite's loss of authority has not been matched by any serious threat to their economic privileges or the interests that they have always served: those of finance capital, and its allies in the technology, media and property sectors. Those who have suffered the most from 'the loss of the social' have been, predictably, the poorest and most vulnerable. As Lebeau explains, the post-2008 austerity programme has constituted a vicious intensification of some of the fundamental processes of neoliberalism, processes that work to undo and sever the bonds that make ordinary social life possible in the modern world. The neoliberal fantasy is one of absolute independence: of the entrepreneurial subject cut free from all historic and communitarian ties (or at least all those not constituted directly by patriarchal distributions of authority).[50] By contrast, as Lebeau explains in her article in this volume, the institution of the welfare state at least in part instantiated a recognition that dependence and interdependence were irreducible features of human and modern experience:

> What Hall describes as the 'ferocious onslaught' on the social-democratic settlement since the late 1970s – an onslaught that cuts across established distinctions among Conservative, Liberal and Labour forms of political rationality – continues to undermine, often to devastate, the lives of millions of people across Britain.[51] Its material costs are calculable, at least in principle.[52] But as Andrew Cooper and Julian Lousada point out in their psychoanalytic study of the changing nature of the welfare project in Britain, the post-war welfare state was also a 'socially sanctioned settlement for the management of our knowledge of social suffering and conflict'; in other words, it was a settlement, at once material and symbolic, that made human need and human vulnerability a properly social concern (from 'cradle to grave' in the classic formulation: you can't birth or bury yourself) (p166).[53]

I, Daniel Blake has been widely understood as a leftist critique of neoliberalism and austerity, from a filmmaker (Ken Loach) whose politics are no secret. In fact it is notable that the film is set in the north-east of England in 2016. During the weeks leading up to the 2017 general election, this was one of the regions in which Labour was expected to suffer heavy losses as disillusioned working-class voters embraced May's nationalist conservatism. Many did; but far too few to undermine to Labour's electoral position there, with non-voters and normally-apathetic young voters turning out in higher numbers than expected to support Labour's explicitly social-democratic programme. However, the most recent electoral contest in the UK, the 2019 European parliamentary elections, saw both Labour and Conservative vote-share collapse as the newly-minted 'Brexit Party' took most of the available seats. As Clarke points out, the same

charity, Shelter, reported 128,000 children without a permanent home in England, Scotland and Wales in 2017, https://fullfact.org/economy/128000-children-are-homeless-britain/, accessed 23 July 2019; in February 2018, a four-year study by Ben Baumberg Geiger, in collaboration with the cross-party think-tank, Demos, revealed that more than a million benefit sanctions had been imposed on disabled people since 2010 (sanctions being one aspect of the new 'hostile environment' for those claiming benefits), http://www.benbgeiger.co.uk/#millionsanctions, accessed 23 July 2018; in December 2017, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published research showing that 14 million people in the UK are now living in poverty (more than 1 in 5 of the population), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/poverty-britain-joseph-rowntree-foundation-report-theresa-may-social-mobility-commission-million-a8089491.html and https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2017, accessed 23 July 2018.

53. Andrew Cooper & Julian Lousada, *Borderline welfare: feeling and fear of feeling in modern welfare*, London, Karnac Books, 2005, p11.

conditions affecting the same constituencies depicted in *I, Daniel Blake* do not necessarily produce politically progressive effects.

Phil Cohen's contribution to this volume addresses this issue directly. At the centre of his essay is Cohen's experience of research into 'new ethnicities' in East London in the 1990s, at a centre inspired and inaugurated by Stuart Hall. Addressing the early stages of the process that saw multicultural, socially-liberal cosmopolitanism establish itself as a cultural norm within a wide cross-section of the British middle class and social elites, Cohen and his colleagues concluded:

> that 'old' ethnicities had not withered away but in some contexts had been re-invigorated, partly as a defensive response to loss, while new ethnicities were largely confined to those who could take advantage of the creative opportunities they offered for self-advancement, especially in the creative industries and knowledge economy (p152).

Referring to the persistence of these effects in the present conjuncture, in a context of drastically weakened social bonds, Cohen tells us that:

> Contemporary right wing populism is a bonders' charter; it summons into being a virtuous, homogeneous, aboriginal People polarised against a cosmopolitan elite who have imported alien cultural goods into the country. In the referendum campaign, UKIP portrayed the Remain camp, who are de facto bridgers, with their mantra 'stronger together', as the new 'enemy within'. The already fading internationalism of the labour movement was consigned to the dustbins of history. The counter demand to 'take back control' [the slogan of the pro-Leave campaign], with its echo of working class syndicalism and popular sovereignty, reverberated both with the widespread desire for protection against the precarities of the labour and housing market, and the equally strong desire to rebuild a moral economy of community around less permissive styles of identity work, so that growing up working class can once again become an apprenticeship to a viable inheritance of skill whose acquisition can function as stable markers of maturity (p157).

THE POLITICS OF 'RACE' AND THE DECLINE OF COSMOPOLITAN NEOLIBERALISM

Cohen's essay offers an invaluable insight into the fluidity and potential multiplicity of racialised identifications in such situations. This is an issue requiring particularly acute analysis in the context of contemporary Britain, where very complex forms of identification and variegated set of class interests have driven relative support for Leave and Remain.[54] Like Lebeau, he makes creative and illuminating use of psychoanalytic theory to try to untangle some

54. Samira Shackle, 'Meet the immigrants who voted for Brexit', *POLITICO*, 2016 <https://www.politico.eu/article/immigrants-who-voted-for-brexit-luton-migration/> [accessed 13 June 2019]; 'People's stated reasons for voting Leave or Remain – CSI Nuffield' <http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/?p=1153> [accessed 13 June 2019].

of these psychosocial knots. Cohen writes:

> From a Lacanian perspective racial phantasies are linked to what Freud called the death drive. The racialised body is always an ancestral body, a dead body whose characteristics are supposedly inherited identically from generation to generation and so remains sealed up in itself and outside history and language. This is the body held in mind, evoked by a code of inheritance that transmits a carbon copy of an original (a 'race') which does not exist. Racial genealogies however dynamic they look always imagine a state of social stasis as their support….Stuart Hall was very supportive of this perspective, not least because of the influence of Fanon on his own thinking about race and his close personal connection with the world of psychoanalysis (p148).

The relationship between fantasy and racial thinking is obviously crucial to consider at historical junctures such as the present: in the UK, and further afield, with right-wing nationalism on the rise and white supremacism returning to mainstream American politics. The belief that the social trauma inflicted by decades of neoliberalism can be attributed to changes in the ethnic composition of the national community, and could be healed by intervening in that composition, is perhaps the defining superstition of contemporary conservatism, and it is one that any progressive critique of neoliberalism must be able to take on – in the seminar room, and on the streets. Few thinkers in the entire canon of modern thought, have offered sharper tools with which to do so than Stuart Hall and Frantz Fanon, to whom Hall felt he owed a considerable debt. In his extensive and rigorous contribution to this collection, David Marriott undertakes to parse out exactly what the nature of Hall's conception of 'blackness' is, how it relates to Fanon's, and what part either play in their highly complex elaborations of anti-racist politics.

Writing in a deconstructive register, Marriott in fact responds to precisely the same short essay by Hall that from which Cohen's research programme took its name: his 1989 article on 'New Ethnicities'.[55] Here Hall writes against any naïve or essentialist conception of black cultural politics, that would only permit highly delimited and uniformly 'positive' representations of black experience, and points out that in contemporary culture, practices of representation do not merely reflect or express some external social reality: they actively intervene in political debates, shaping our experience of the world and defining the terms of social and cultural reference. Marriott pays particular attention to Hall's remark that:

> It [the *constitutive* role of representation in social and political life] marks what I can only call 'the end of innocence', or the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject (*New Ethnicities*).

55. Stuart Hall, 'New ethnicities', in *Black film, British cinema*, pp27-31, London, ICA Documents 7, 1988. (Hereafter *New Ethnicities*).

In response Marriot asks 'what would it mean to bring blackness to an end, to tell its story differently, by bringing to an end the innocent forms of its formulation, and this ending being read, in turn, as an obscure, undecidable beginning?'. As Marriott shows us, with detailed reference to Hall's writings and to those of the previous generation of writers on comparable issues – Fanon, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver – Hall's rhetorical gesture here is not unique to his *oeuvre*, or to the 'postmodern' moment of the late 1980s, but is in a certain sense typical of the work of a modern black radicalism that must always deprive itself of any risk of consolation in an essential blackness or irreducible African nature.

Not that Marriott sees these thinkers as taking identical positions in relation to this constitutive non-essentiality. He writes that:

> When Hall cites Fanon, who is so often mentioned in this text, it is to underscore the slipperiness of any black discourse that is founded on some nativism or ethnocentrism and that unilaterally proclaims itself the jurisdiction of what blackness has meant historically, culturally, and politically. But even though Hall invokes blackness as a weave of differences – by which is meant an experience of *différance* distinct from completion or truth telling – blackness is always addressed as a problem of conversion, whereas for Fanon blackness is never converted without already being crossed out, written over, purloined, erased by its relation to that which it must never coincide with: the relation to identity that is never simply a relation but a destitution covered over, or always already masked, by racism (p225).

And indeed, Marriott never does Hall the disservice of merely deferring to his handling of these issues. Hall was writing, explicitly, at the high moment of post-structuralism, and, coincidentally at the moment of the fall of Soviet Communism, and of the final political defeat of American black radicalism (with the failure of Jesse Jackson's second bid for the Democratic presidential nomination), at a moment when the deconstruction of black essentialism may well have seemed like a more urgent task than the endless repetition of the naming and refusal of basic racism. Marriott, a black British writer based in the US, writes at the moment of a significant revival of the tradition of black resistance and militancy in the US,[56] inviting us to consider anew the conceptual stakes of Fanon's rigorous anti-colonialism, alongside Hall's problematisation of any identity whatsoever. 'This, then,' he writes, 'would be a blackness whose execution literally repeats the end of any essential notion, without for all that transforming its imprisoned meaning into a last redemptive moment'.

56. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2016.

These reflections remind us that, even more than was the case forty years ago, any thinking of the conjuncture must move between the classical Gramscian level of analysis – the 'national popular' – and other levels:

transnational, global and planetary. Of course, when considering the political and social functions of 'black' culture, it has never been possible to ignore these dimensions. Black British culture has always existed in the space of 'the Black Atlantic'. The most visible expression of Black British youth culture in recent years – 'Grime' music – draws on both Jamaican dancehall and American hip-hop, and has been repeatedly looked to as a site of potential politicisation and radicalisation of its core constituencies. As mentioned above, the short-lived 'Grime4Corbyn' phenomenon seemed to represent a potential fulfilment of these hopes. Any realistic assessment, however, would have to conclude that the UK still awaits any significant revival of black radicalism that could equate to the galvanising effects of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, while also recognizing in episodes such as Grime4Corbyn, the latent potential for such mobilisation, and the likelihood of it occurring in explicit dialogue with movements and tendencies in the US and elsewhere. At the same time, these cases serve as a reminder that experiences of race, racism, and cosmopolitanism are very different in different national localities, and that the national-popular remains the fundamental level at which both politics and culture are experienced by most subjects of advanced capitalist culture today.

These facts are illustrated and demonstrated with astonishing rigour by Moritz Ege and Alexandre Gallas in their contribution to this collection. Taking Hall's analytical method as their starting point, along with the approaches of related thinkers such as Bob Jessop and Nicos Poulantzas, they offer to English-speaking readers an unparalleled level of insight into the precise political and cultural situation obtaining in contemporary Germany. Analogous to Hall's concept of 'Thatcherism', 'Merkelism' is here understood as a specific political project whose remarkable capacity to stabilise social relations in Europe's largest European economy over a sustained period, seems to have finally been exhausted. This is not to say that Merkelism follows the same populist, antagonistic logic as Thatcherism. In many ways it is more closely related to other 'centrist', 'institutionalist' neoliberal projects such as Blairism or the Obama programme: a technocratic project, carefully making concessions to both conservative and progressive constituencies whenever required, continually working to forestall any large-scale aggregation of popular demands.[57]

Specifically, Ege and Gallas focus on a range of responses to the recent European refugee crisis on the part of various political, social and cultural actors in Germany, considering the ways in which liberal and conservative discourses have been deployed and the material interests underpinning them. In fact, despite the significant differences between the two sets of national experiences, their analysis bears striking comparisons with those made of the British situation. Just as in the UK, the medium-term context is constituted by the inability of the regime to sustain both capitalist profitability and universal living standards following the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath. But

57. Jeremy Gilbert, *Common ground: democracy and collectivity in an age of individualism*, London, Pluto Press, 2014, pp62-3.

this is not to say that any mechanical correspondence between economic developments and political outcomes can be assumed. Commenting on the consequent rise of the far right AFD (Alternative for Germany) party, they write:

> While we believe that the economic dimension is crucial, it is *not* our argument that it was smouldering economic discontent that *ultimately caused* the anti-refugee swing of opinion or the rise of the AfD, and that the latter were 'really' about socio-economic decline, rather than, for example, racism. Instead, we argue that the discontent forms the breeding ground in which racist attitudes (old or new) spread easily if they articulate discontent with the status quo (p121).

In a characterisation that will seem remarkably familiar to both British and American readers, and indeed readers in France or many other countries, they write:

> The current conjuncture of capitalism, under its specific conditions in Germany, is characterised by a protracted socio-economic crisis for people on low incomes that is lived through a situation of political and cultural polarisation. The exhaustion of Merkelism is revealed by the fact that a pragmatic course with a de-politicising rhetoric is blocked in a situation marked by a deep polarisation not just of the political scene, but of German society as a whole (p125).

The points of commonality are obvious. A technocratic political elite, in power since the 1990s, broadly committed to cosmopolitan neoliberalism, has lost too much of its political authority with too many different social constituencies to be able to carry on with its project. A conservative nationalist backlash has built up amongst some of those constituencies, activating latent forms of racism and xenophobia.

However, what evidently differentiates the situation in Germany from that in the UK and the – where the remarkable growth in support for socialist organisations and platforms among the young is one of the most notable current phenomena – is that the political left has not yet been able to make any significant gains from the exhaustion of Merkelism. On one level, however, even this situation seems remarkably familiar, at least from a British perspective:

> How should one deal with the issue of scale and with the political (and economic and cultural) arena of the nation-state? In our view, the recurrent debates about identity politics as opposed to class politics result from a specific aspect of the current conjuncture, the almost necessarily aporetic stance of left politics on the national state. At the heart of far right discourses

is the claim to represent the 'people', usually understood as neatly defined group based on ethnic, racial and culturalist criteria, vis-à-vis a 'globalist' elite, which allegedly destroys national cultures, polities and economies by allowing in migrants. Behind this discourse is a deeply seated racism, nationalism and – where global financial elites are concerned – antisemitism, but also the fact that the transnational neoliberal project has indeed destroyed institutions and cultures of solidarity that were mostly located at the national level. So how should the left respond to this discourse? Does it makes sense to transform it along left-communitarian lines in order to win back working-class people who vote for the right? This what the social-democratic commentator Ernst Hillebrand argues. He suggests taking the side of the 'proletarianised somewheres' against the privileged 'anywheres'. In his view, this can be done by promoting an agenda that increases the formers' 'life chances' and 'chances of participation' and combines this with restrictions on migration. Or does an adequate response consists in strengthening trans-national solidarity and building an alliance between left-liberal, cosmopolitan milieus in the middle class and left-leaning workers - a 'middle-bottom alliance' , as one of the organic intellectuals of the Left Party, Michael Brie, put it years ago? (p127).

This is almost precisely the dilemma faced by the Labour Party in the UK since the moment of the 2017 general election. It is widely assumed that, had the party gone into that election declaring its intention to attempt to ignore or reverse the Brexit vote, then it would have faced the electoral cataclysm that had been predicted for it.[58] Since that moment, Labour has been faced with the problem that a crucial minority of its electoral base voted 'Leave', and sees this as consistent with its rejection of cosmopolitan neoliberalism, while a clear majority of that base voted 'Remain', and sees Brexit as entirely inconsistent with its cosmopolitan culture or with the internationalist traditions of the left wing of the labour movement. Labour's strategy has been to try to accommodate both camps by persistently fudging the issue: arguing for a 'softer' Brexit that most experts believe cannot be negotiated, arguing that such a deal should be put to the country in a second referendum, but not calling for any such referendum yet. The result was a European Election in May 2019 that saw both Remain and Leave voters desert Labour and the Conservatives to cast protest votes either for the Brexit Party (that wants to implement Brexit even if no agreement on future relations can be reached with the EU) or for smaller parties taking an unambiguously pro-remain position. However, a June 2019 by-election in Peterborough saw Labour narrowly defeat the Brexit Party; and by-elections are generally taken to be more reliable indicators of national electoral trends in the UK than are European elections, which are traditionally regarded by voters as an opportunity to cast a protest vote for a small party, in the knowledge that it will have no significant implications for national politics.

58. Paul Mason, 'Brexit is a failed project. Labour must oppose it' *The Guardian*, 11 December 2018, section Opinion <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/11/brexit-labour-second-referendum-vote-remain-paul-mason> [accessed 13 June 2019].

What needs to be explained, then, is what has enabled Labour's recent repeated, unexpected electoral successes, where no equivalent developments can be yet discerned in Germany. The answer is simple: but it points to a dramatic conjunctural shift at the level not just of the national-popular, but of global capitalism itself. There is little question that Labour's recent success in Peterborough can be explained primarily by the very high level of activist mobilisation that it was able to achieve, just as it was in many key marginal constituencies at the 2017 general election. This mobilisation has been primarily enabled by the creative and successful deployment of social media and other 'platform' technologies in order to drastically reduce the cost of such mobilisation. The organisation *Momentum* – representing pro-Corbyn Labour Party members – has repeatedly succeeded in mobilising members around the country using its email lists and WhatsApp groups, organising car pools, directing members to training sessions, organising them into canvassing rotas, etc. etc. None of this would have been possible prior to the advent of social media and smartphones; and it is indicative of what a significant epochal shift is represented by the ubiquitous distribution of those technologies.

In his contribution to this volume, John Clarke considers what the most fundamental defining features of the current conjuncture might be:

> We might name the underlying conditions as the still unresolved crises of Atlantic Fordism which, for a while at least, provided the stabilising regime of accumulation for twentieth century capitalism in the global North. Whether a new regime of accumulation has been developed and stabilised in what Jessop calls a new 'spatio-temporal fix' is open to argument. For my purposes here, though, starting from Atlantic Fordism and its crises reframes the dynamics and temporalities that might be in play in understanding the present. In particular, it gives a specific visibility to the question of the 'national economy' and the shifting fortunes of the 'core' Fordist working class and their trajectory through processes of de-industrialisation, de-socialisation and de-collectivisation following the original 1970s crises of Fordism (p134).

Here, Clarke refers to the ideas of the 'regulation school' of political economists, and their most prominent anglophone representative, the social and political theorist Bob Jessop. According to this model, capitalism always requires a particular ensemble of regulatory institutions, governmental practices and socio-cultural norms in order to facilitate the general process of capital accumulation under particular historic and technological conditions.[59] 'Atlantic Fordism' is the name given to that 'regime of accumulation' that obtained in the US and Western Europe between the Second World War and

59. Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum, *Beyond the regulation approach: putting capitalist economies in their place*, Cheltenham, Elgar, 2006; Michel Aglietta, *A theory of capitalist regulation*, Toulouse, Calmann-Levy, 1979.

the economic crises of the 1970s. This regime organised capital accumulation on the basis of a highly controlled 'mode of regulation', with high levels of long-range planning and centralised control being exercised by both governmental and corporate institutions, and a generalised tendency towards mass production, large economies of scale contributing to the homogenisation of both material culture and socio-political attitudes.

From the 1980s onwards, many commentators, including Stuart Hall, were attracted to the claim that globalisation, the automation of many industrial processes, and the shift in emphasis within economies like those of the UK and the US, had all amounted to a shift to a new regime of accumulation: post-Fordism.[60] Post-Fordism promoted an active diversification of cultural norms and consumer tastes, as new technologies enabled smaller and more disaggregated firms to compete for ever-more specialised consumer niche markets. It was therefore understood by Hall and many of his key interlocutors, as well as a number of other commentators, as constituting the material infrastructure of the general cultural towards 'postmodernity' and 'postmodernism'. An identical argument was made by David Harvey, although he eschewed the term 'post-Fordism' in favour of the synonymous 'flexible accumulation'.[61]

60. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, *New times: the changing face of politics in the 1990s*, London, Verso, 1989.

61. David Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992.

Clarke here alludes to Jessop's well-documented scepticism as to the coherence of post-Fordism as a complete regime of accumulation. Jessop's historic and recent contributions to the development of regulation school and post-regulation school political economy, state theory and 'cultural political economy', constitute one of the most elaborated attempts to develop a theoretical framework for multi-scalar conjunctural analysis. There is no space in this essay or in the present volume for an adequate engagement with that work, but we hope to undertake such an engagement in volume two of the 'This Conjuncture' series of issues of *New Formations*. For now, it is enough to suggest that the concept of 'regime of accumulation' remains analytically very useful, but is probably only sustainable so far as it is recognised that the degree of socio-political coherent, cultural consensus, economic efficiency and 'spatio-temporal fixity' that characterised 'Atlantic Fordism' was not typical of capitalism throughout its chaotic and turbulent history; such that the very instability of 'post-Fordism' may render it more typical of successive regimes of accumulation than Fordism had been. Jessop and others have in recent years rather moved away from using the classic terminology of the regulation school. So we might do the same here by proposing a deliberately looser term – perhaps 'regulatory assemblage'[62] – to name the kind of thing that both Fordism and post-Fordism were: mutually-reinforcing, but always contingent and relatively precarious sets of institutions and practices deployed by capitalists, corporations and other social agents (especially governments), to create conditions under which specific forms of accumulation could advance as far as the current technological limitations allowed.

62. Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage theory*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

My reason for wanting to name and identify 'post-Fordism' as a specific

type of formation, or regulatory assemblage, is that 'post-Fordism' may well be the best available name for something that has recently been superseded, while understanding this transition may be crucial to fully understanding our present conjuncture. The term 'post-Fordism' was popularised on the British left in the 1980s by the radical economist Robin Murray. In 2015, Andy Goffey and I interviewed Murray for *New Formations*:

> **Jeremy** And in terms of periodisation, are we still in the post-Fordist moment?
>
> **Robin** no, we've gone to post-post-Fordism.
>
> **Jeremy** And what's the difference between post-Fordism and post-post-Fordism?
>
> **Robin** Well post-Fordism was about the production process, and its transformation: the sudden switch in gravity and magnetism, from the push to the pull; and the various subjective changes that went with that. The new subjectivity and the new post-Fordist production started dancing together, each finding interesting aspects of the other and sometimes crossing over.
>
> So we saw the emergence of the consumer as producer as a developing feature of post-Fordism. There has been a growth in the DIY economy. With some products the parts are assembled by the consumer according to the design of the manufacturer (as with flat-pack furniture or with standard Lego); or they are assembled by the manufacturer according to the choice of the consumer (as with Dell computers;) or assembled by the 'produser' according to the design of the produser (as with advanced versions of Lego). Toyota even applied these self-design principles to housing.
>
> What has now grown out of this is the era of platforms. The decisive date was 2003. That was the year when Silicon Valley realised that they had to move from content to platforms. Just as traditional money has no concern with the content of the commodities whose exchange it enables, so platforms present themselves as innocent of content. They enable others to share content (Google) or exchange content (EBay and Amazon), or simply communicate (Facebook and Linked In).
>
> As it has turned out the new platforms are far from innocent of content, but they relate to content in a different way. They may not have to produce content. That can be delegated to others, like a modern version of the putting out system. But they have great interest in the substance of the content and the identity of those who are using the platform. Because it is that kind of information which for many of them is their main source of revenue. EBay and Amazon may take a cut from the exchanges they enable. But Google and Facebook make their money as intermediaries for the advertising industry. They have become core suppliers and hosts

to the attention economy.

In this they are similar to many modern forms of money. Credit cards act not only as mediums of exchange and sources of credit, but also as sources of laser information: about who is exchanging and what is exchanged. It as if all our coins no longer simply carry the queen's head on them: they also have a microchip within them, one that can watch our every transaction.

That is the capacity of a platform, and, just as the informational role of money has led to the proliferation of currencies (in such forms as store cards, loyalty cards and air-miles), each of which is an enclosure of information for the use of competition in the attention economy, so platforms too are specialised, but they hold within them the hunger to extend. It is no accident that Amazon has moved into banking functions offering national and international payments systems, and in 2013 introduced its own currency, Amazon Coins.

For post-post Fordist capital, it is less the control of bounded systems that is important, but the control of platforms and their information in distributed populations.

What are the implications of this new phase? What has it done to social relations, to forms of exploitation and the accumulation of capital, and to the possibilities of resistance to and autonomy from capital? Michel Bauwens, an inspiring lead theorist and promotor of the new commons movement, frames the issue in terms of value. He sees users of the platforms as creators of value, part of which is appropriated by the owners of the platforms. For this reason he refers to Google and Facebook as 'netarchical capital'.[63]

Since the publication of this interview, a number of influential publications have referred to this new phase of capital accumulation as 'surveillance capitalism' or 'platform capitalism'.[64] Most of this recent commentary has been largely pessimistic in tone: focusing on the monopoly tendencies of platform capitalism or the illiberal tendencies of surveillance capitalism. All of these critiques are fully justified. However, developments such as Labour's recent electoral successes surely demonstrate that there is also considerable democratic potential in the capacity of platform technologies to enable groups to self-aggregate and self-mobilise, sometimes on very large scales: as commentators such as Bauwens have always argued.[65]

Taken together, these negative and positive tendencies can all be seen as typical of a distinctive new phase in the global organisation and regulation of capital accumulation. Arguably this phase has seen the technology sector – institutionalised and symbolised by 'Silicon Valley' and its most prominent chief executives – acquire a new prominence as the leading fraction of capital: the one least subject to effective governmental interference and most able to influence social, cultural and political outcomes on many scales. Although

63. Andrew Goffey, 'Post-post-Fordism in the era of platforms', *New Formations*, 84-85, 2015, p184–208. https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/new-formations/84-85/post-post-fordism-in-era-of-platforms

64. Shoshana Zuboff, *The age of surveillance capitalism: the fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*, London, Profile Books, 2019; Nick Srnicek, *Platform capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017.

65. Michel Bauwens, Vasilis Kostakis and Alex Pazaitis, *Peer to peer: the commons manifesto*, London, University of Westminster Press, 2019.

finance capital retains a certain privileged position in the circuits of global capital accumulation, and although the finance and tech sectors remain deeply intertwined, arguably the emergence of experimental technologies such as cryptocurrency demonstrate a new capacity and willingness on the part of the technology sector to threaten even the single most unique and crucial historic privilege of the banks: the capacity to create money.

From this perspective, and taking account of all of the various observations and analyses offered here so far, then we could argue that what defines our present conjuncture is the interaction of two key processes and tendencies: the overall change to the techno-social organisation of capitalism since the advent of platform capitalism in 2003, and the declining authority of the neoliberal political class since 2008, particularly as it has tried to shore up the weakened the position of finance capital through the implementation of austerity. These processes have acted upon populations within which consent to neoliberalism was for the most part only ever 'disaffected' in nature, and within which moral commitment to the prevailing cultural consensus of individualist, multicultural, socially-liberal cosmopolitanism was always highly uneven. Where that commitment has been called into question or challenged, issues of racialised identity, once thought consigned to the bad old days before the Third Way consensus took hold, have been activated and animated in various, mostly reactionary forms. The wider political and cultural effects of these interacting processes have been highly varied and uneven. They have largely depended upon the contingent capacities of different groups and constituencies in different countries, regions and localities to deploy whatever organisational, cultural, political and intellectual resources were available to them, in order to formulate responses and agitate for political solutions.[66] But since 2015, their convergence and multiplying effects have been such that we can fairly say that in the specific British case, the conjuncture obtaining from the late 1980s – the 'long 90s' epoch of cosmopolitan neoliberal hegemony under post-Fordist conditions – has finally come to an end.

THE PLANETARY SCALE

However, even this analysis cannot adequately explain perhaps the most striking new development within British political culture. For several days of April 2019, the 'Extinction Rebellion' (XR) movement occupied highly visible sites in London – Marble Arch, Waterloo Bridge, etc. – deliberately provoking mass arrests of hundreds of activists protesting government inaction over climate change, most of whom had no previous record of political action. Whether this movement will produce any tangible outcomes remains to be seen, but it success in mobilising previously unmobilised citizens, and in raising the level of public concern over the climate crisis, is undeniable.[67]

XR is not unique, unprecedented or even very dramatically different from earlier waves of peaceful 'direct action' protest that focussed on

66. It would be beyond our scope to explain exactly why it has been easier for digitally-enabled activists to use the Labour Party as a political vehicle than it has been for any equivalent forces in Germany to find a suitable institutional vehicle of their own.

67. Matthew Taylor, 'Latest global school climate strikes expected to beat turnout record', *The Guardian*, 24 May 2019, section Environment <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/24/latest-global-school-climate-strikes-expected-to-beat-turnout-record> [accessed 13 June 2019].

68. Tim Jordan and Adam Lent, *Storming the millennium: the new politics of change*, London, Lawrence &

environmental issues while claiming to transcend traditional politics.[68] But its relative success at this time and in this form requires some attention and explanation. The international wave of school strikes was a major factor in generating interest in the issue and sympathy for the idea of protesting over it.[69] Public frustration that the entire democratic process since July 2017 seems to have been absorbed by a perpetual national stalemate over the issue of how and whether to implement Brexit was clearly another factor motivating large-scale participation in a movement focussed on a more important issue. But another was the shocking heat-wave that came over the country in late February of that year. Unusual weather patterns have become a normal part of everyday life in recent years, and the British rarely complain when the sun shines for longer than usual. But the experience of temperatures in much of England exceeding those that would normally be expected in early June, in what is traditionally one of the bleakest months of the year, contributed very immediately to a widespread sense that something was very wrong.[70] In this sense, we might say that both the general climactic conditions on planet Earth, and their particular manifestations in specific localities, also constitute crucial features of the contemporary conjuncture, which cannot be thought outside of the time-frame of the apparent onset of the 'anthropocene' epoch.[71] This is a scale that exceeds even that of the 'global' economy or the transnational 'world-system': the scale of the planetary ecosystem and the 'infinite relationality' of its human and non-human components.[72]

At the same time, specific environmental factors, as well as natural and geological events, can be seen as key factors interacting with the economic, the political, the social and the cultural in the constitution of specific national and regional conjunctures. This is a key theme in Gabriela Mendez Cota's contribution to this collection. Like Ege and Gallas, Cota offers anglophone readers a uniquely comprehensive and rigorous account of current political conditions in a country that is rarely covered in depth by our political media. At the same time, she advances the project of conjunctural analysis considerably by incorporating this environmental dimension, focussing as she does on some of the ways that issues of ecological justice have been politicised in Mexico in recent years, particularly in the wake of the 2017 Puebla earthquake. In this, Cota engages with themes that will be familiar to geographers, reminding us that human geography has been one field that has intersected very productively with Hall's tradition of conjunctural analysis.[73] But Cota does so in an entirely distinctive way, narrating Mexico's recent political history at the level of movement mobilisation, institutional politics, macro-economics and socio-cultural trends.

Cota's particular point of focus is the conditions giving rise to the mobilisation of the *Asamblea Nacional de Afectados Ambientales* (ANAA): the National Assembly of the Environmentally Affected. She describes this as 'a nationwide network of environmental struggles that took shape between 2006 and 2014'. Cota shows how the growing politicisation of the environmental

Wishart, 1999.

69. Matthew Taylor, 'Latest global school climate strikes expected to beat turnout record', *The Guardian*, 24 May 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/24/latest-global-school-climate-strikes-expected-to-beat-turnout-record> [accessed 13 June 2019].

70. 'Opinion: A heatwave in February is not OK – this is what climate breakdown feels like', *The Independent*, 2019 <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/uk-weather-heatwave-climate-change-global-warming-february-met-office-a8797136.html> [accessed 13 June 2019].

71. Nigel Clark and Yasmin Gunaratnam, 'Earthing the *Anthropos*? From "socializing the Anthropocene" to geologizing the social', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 20, 1, 2016, pp146–163.

72. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The essential Wallerstein*, New York, New Press, 2000.

73. Noel Castree, 'What kind of critical geography for what kind of politics?', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 32, 12, 2016, pp2091–2095; Doreen Massey, *For space*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2015, p192.

consequences of intense neoliberalism, in particular since the late 2000s and especially following the 2017 earthquake, is provoking a significant redistribution of political allegiances and associations. Indeed, in an intriguing echo of some of David Marriot's remarks, Cota suggests that any full engagement with the reality of environmental injustice might necessitate a move away from conceptualising politics as just an endless competition between narratives, discourses and undecidable representations:

> I would therefore like to suggest that ANAA's story may be signaling the emergence of an environmental conjuncture not only in the sense of pushing for a centrality or hierarchy of environmental issues in the political agenda, but in the sense of a radical displacement of the framework that isolates environmental issues from all other issues and deals with them in a merely instrumental, representational way. ANAA does not just engage in a 'war of narratives', but rather it performs an intervention into the very framework that reduces politics to a war of narratives. It creates space for thinking something else – perhaps through a novel awareness of the material precariousness of subject formation – without guarantees. By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that rethinking cultural studies in Latin America through the de-essentialising work of infrapolitical deconstruction may radicalise an engagement with the environmental conjuncture, including cultural and political phenomena such as the ANAA (p86).

Cota's remarks and analysis serves as a powerful provocation to consider the terms of reference for conjunctural analysis, and the fundamental question of what its conception of politics actually is. As I have already suggested, it is always been a mistake to assume that conjunctural analysis in Hall's tradition is concerned only with the politics of representation, with the symbolic organisation of consensus or with the simple unification of national communities on any scale. An emphasis on processes of identification, on subjective experience, on the politics of culture and on the public contests between different explanatory narratives can all give rise to sense that this mode of analysis can be reduced to a kind of sophisticated history of ideas. But this is always a misapprehension. Ultimately, conjunctural analysis, and all of Hall's legacy, stands in a resolutely materialist tradition, concerned not just with the politics of ideas, but with the conflicts of material interests that shape all actual historical outcomes.

Indeed, the logic of politics in the Anthropocene is such that these conflicts no longer determine only the fate of human institutions and human cultures, but of the entire planetary ecosphere.[74] To that extent, as Cota so forcefully reminds us, struggles and analyses at the level of the national-popular are no longer separable (if they ever were) from those affecting the chemical composition of the atmosphere, geological stabilities and flows, or the organic cycles of local ecosystems. Understanding the stakes in such a situation, as

74. Naomi Klein, *This changes everything: capitalism vs. the climate*, London, Simon and Schuster, 2014.

75. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The modern world-system I: capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world-economy in the sixteenth century, with a new prologue.*, 2014 <http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9780520948570/> [accessed 13 June 2019].

Stuart so often reminded us, will always require a multi-scalar, multi-temporal attention to the continuities and discontinuities defining this, and any other, conjuncture.[75]

Mapping exercises such as we have engaged in here, cannot hope to offer any clear route to the future. But they can at least offer us some clues, some indications of likely imminent developments, some sense of where the fault-lines and what the stakes are likely to be in the very near future. Hall and his colleagues in *Policing the Crisis* could not prevent the rise of Thatcherism. But they did a pretty good job of showing where it was going.

Stuart didn't always claim to be able to derive political prescriptions from analyses such as that offered by *Policing the Crisis*. But whenever possible, he wanted to think, and wanted his readers, students and interlocutors to think, about what the active political implications of their observations might be. I offer then a couple of reflections on what lessons may be drawn here for progressive politics in the early twenty-first century. The first is that the context of platform capitalism is now the terrain on which we operate. There is no going back (there never is), and there is no point wringing our hands over the loss of privacy, or the exacerbation of public volatility, or any of the other negative effects attributed to social media platforms by so many commentators. We will need to use these tools or we will be defeated (and this no doubt applies in Germany as everywhere else).

The second is that internationalism is not an ideological luxury any more. The fact that politics still largely takes place at the level of the national-popular is no longer a circumstance that we simply have to accept as given: rather it is one that must be actively challenged. We simply cannot formulate a meaningful political response to the challenge of climate change without a certain degree of planetary consciousness, and so without a deliberate reclamation of cosmopolitan culture both from the conservatives who would undermine it altogether, and from the residual neoliberal elites who would claim it entirely as their own. There will be many possible interpretations and implications of these observations; but neither of them will be dispensable for any progressive politics in the foreseeable future. In making these claims, of course, I stand firmly in the cosmopolitan, libertarian, future-oriented tradition of the British New Left, and of perhaps its single greatest thinker: Stuart Hall.

Stuart was not the only thinker to enjoin upon us a duty to consider the world in all its complexity, to think power and its operations at various speeds, or to think across disciplines, across epochs across theoretical boundaries. But for all of us contributing to this volume, as for so many others, it was his injunctions, his methods and his examples as much as any other that have inspired us to undertake the task. No tribute can ever match or adequately honour the complex, incalculable debt owed to any single life by all those touched, inspired or affected by it. But here, we've done what we can: for Stuart Hall