THIS CONJUNCTURE 3

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This issue of New Formations is, in effect, the third in a series. Like its predecessors – published together as issue 96-97, – it seeks to pay tribute to the lasting intellectual legacy of Stuart Hall, both by exploring some of the central themes of his own work, and by undertaking from various perspectives the task that he so often enjoined upon his students and interlocutors: the analysis of the contemporary conjuncture, in all of its complexity. Sixteen months have passed since the publication of that double issue (I write in February 2021); during which time some extraordinary – perhaps epochal – events have occurred.

On both sides of the Atlantic, an electoral adventure undertaken by the radical left has ended in disappointment. In December, 2019 the UK Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn, suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Boris Johnson's Conservatives standing on a nationalist platform that was as crude as it was dangerous. That platform consisted of almost no policy but to 'get Brexit done': and done it has now been, despite the mounting evidence of catastrophic economic costs. In the US, socialist Bernie Sanders was beaten to the Democratic presidential nomination by Barak Obama's former Vice-President, Joe Biden: a centrist machine politician of the first order. Biden beat Donald Trump in last November's election, and his recent inauguration was characterised by encouragingly progressive rhetoric; but it remains to be seen whether his administration will actually mark a significant left turn for US government policy.

But neither the formation of a right-wing Conservative government in the UK, nor the election of a moderate Democratic president in the US, are remotely unusual occurrences. The real historic event of the past year has been that which saw the most radical peacetime disruption of daily life within living memory, in most countries on the planet: the Covid 19 pandemic, along with the various attempts by governments to control it and mitigate its effects. All of our contributions were first drafted prior to this event, and at the time of writing it seems decidedly premature to derive any long-term conclusions from the experience, except to observe that at least one major tendency of recent developments in capitalism has been accelerated and intensified by these events: the growing power and influence of digital platforms and the corporations that operate them.

The massive transfer of large quantities of social and cultural activity to online platforms (from schooling to everyday social interaction), and the concentration of power and profit in the hands of web-based distribution giants such as Amazon, are two of the most strikingly observable social phenomena of the moment. Those of us working in universities have been

faced with a present in which communications technology has only increased the demands on our time and attention, while, in the UK at least, the long-term financialisation of universities has come up against the critical economic effects of the pandemic to produce a wave of redundancies and uncertainty within the sector. This is just one localised example of the increasing imbalance of power between those controlling digital platforms and financial flows, and everyone else.

One reaction to this shift has been an explosion of the internet-enabled conspiracy theories that have been circulating and developing online for many years now. In part this phenomenon can be understood as a kind of direct reaction to the growing power of Silicon Valley: conspiracy cults such as the Q-Anon movements have grown up in the less regulated corners of the internet, and often manifest deep resentment towards the liberal technocracy that leading figures of the tech industry like to present themselves as. This, arguably, is the thread that connects the New Age anti-vaccine campaigner to the alt-right white supremacist. What makes such thinking especially dangerous today is its growing penetration of both the mainstream political sphere, and the institutions of the 'repressive state apparatus'. In both the US and France, for example, there have been worrying reports of significant neo-fascist influence within the ranks of the police, and observable relationship between anti-vaccination discourse and the rise of far-right politics.

At the same time, in direct response both to white supremacist violence and to the stinging inequalities that the pandemic was only exacerbating, 2020 saw the most significant upsurge of anti-racist militancy in decades, as the Black Lives Matter movements spread first across the US and then to other countries. In the US, this seemed only to lend impetus to the forces seeking to dislodge Trump from office: Biden endorsed the movement, and Kamala Harris is now the first woman, and the first person of colour, to hold the office of Vice-President. In the UK, Labour leader Keir Starmer was reluctant and inarticulate in offering such endorsement, and his clumsy embrace of nationalist themes has not endeared him to anti-racists thus far.

Although they were written before any of these events occurred, every one of our contributions to this volume speaks directly to some of these phenomena.

Scott McCracken's examination of the analytical thematics of defeat is relevant both to the left – given the events already referred to – but also, he argues, to the right. His essay responds to accounts of Brexit which present it as evidence of deep-seated regional, generational, and cultural divides. His alternative is to view the rise of right-wing populism as a visceral reaction to a long experience of defeat. In the Marxist tradition, from the 'Eighteenth Brumaire' to Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History', the event of defeat has often been a prompt to conjunctural thinking. Conjunctural analysis begins with the identification of a break, or what the historian Fernand

Braudel calls a 'structural discontinuity'. Following Stuart Hall's method of conjunctural analysis, McCracken's article suggests that recognising this conjuncture as a moment of defeat is a necessary part of reinterpreting the past in order to change the future.

In their contribution, Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai respond to precisely the phenomenon against which so much contemporary reaction reacts. Alongside right-wing nationalism, populism, and the ongoing crisis of the left they observe a different kind of political commonsense emerging in consumer culture. Spanning burger chains to oil companies and fast fashion, there is an increasing saturation of 'feel good' and 'positive' messages of female empowerment, LGBTIQ pride, racial and religious diversity and inclusion, and environmental awareness. In their article, they question how radical politics – especially around gender, race and sexuality – is put to work in the current moment as a response to crisis/ crises in this context of corporate 'wokeness'. They analyse the texture of woke capitalism – what it re-articulates and disarticulates – using Stuart Hall's ideas of conjuncture, while contributing an explicitly feminist perspective that notes the extent to which these ideological formations operate *affectively*. Gill and Kanai draw on contemporary feminist work illustrating the affective operation of neoliberalism in the production of everyday life and subjectivity. Going beyond a simple diagnosis of incorporation and recuperation of radical movements, they use the case study of woke capitalism to suggest the production of new affective movements structuring the ongoing obduracy of neoliberalism.

Ben Little and Alison Winch present a case study that complements Gill's and Kanai's analysis. Their article looks at the events surrounding the sacking of Google engineer James Damore who was fired for authoring a memo which stated that women are biologically less suited to high-stress, high-status technical employment than men. Damore, asserting that his document 'was absolutely consistent with what he'd seen online', instantly became an ambivalent hero of the alt-right. In the media furore that followed, surveys indicated widespread support for Damore's position within the tech industry. Like the men who own and run the companies of Silicon Valley, the software engineer subscribes to the idea that the world can be understood and altered through the rigorous application of the scientific method. And as he draws on bodies of knowledge from evolutionary psychology and mathematical biology, their analaysis shows how the core belief structures of Silicon Valley, when transferred from the technical to the cultural and social domain, can reproduce the sort of misogynistic 'rationalism' that fuels the alt-right. Winch and Little argue that Damore's memo is in line with Google's ideology of 'dataism': that is, the belief that the world can be reduced to decontextualised information and subject to quantifiable logics. Through its use of dataism, the memo reveals much about the similarities and continuities between Damore, the ideas laid out in his memo, and Google itself. Rather than being in opposition, they argue, these two entities are jostling for a place in the

patriarchal structures of a new form of capitalism.

Gil Rodman's article looks back to Stuart Hall's seminal essay, on anti-racism 'The Whites of Their Eyes'. In it, Hall had admonished the left for its collective failure in figuring out how to fight back against racism effectively. As Rodman suggests, this criticism is no less valid today than it was then, and we still have a lot to learn about how to defeat racism once and for all. As Hall points out in *The Fateful Triangle*, we've known for more than a century that this thing we call 'race' isn't a scientifically valid phenomenon – and yet it continues to function perfectly well in the world as if it is one anyway. As Hall noted in a 2011 interview, the mere act of unmasking essentialisms and deconstructing binaries doesn't stop them from ‹roaring away' in the world, completely undisturbed by our analytic prowess. Rodman's essay does not pretend to have any definitive answers to Hall's challenge. But it attempts to take stock of the current state of anti-racist struggles (at least in the US) and to offer a critical analysis of how and why our current efforts to combat racism continue to be so ineffective.

Considering matters on an even larger scale than our other contributions, Ben Highmore's article could not have been more prescient in anticipating the global historical event of Covid-19. As he points out, the planetary scale of climate change challenges forms of conjunctural analyses that are based around the scale of national politics and culture. Global warming insists on planetary dimensions and invites us to treat humankind as a species that has developed a taste for fossil fuels. Critical Cultural Studies, and the human sciences more generally, seem founded on the principle that culture and society has historically worked to differentiate humans, and that the task of a critical practice is to investigate this process within and across specific geographical locales. How, Highmore asks, do we reconcile what seems to be an unreconcilable difference between Cultural Studies and climate change? In response to this question, he argues that alongside the necessary work of conjunctural analysis we should remember that the critical human sciences have other capacities that are more suited to negotiating the monstrous diversity of scales that global warming and the micro cultures of the everyday articulate. Alongside conjunctural analysis he argues for the relevance of an approach that would posit 'disjunctive constellations' as objects for attention. While it might seem counter-intuitive, the disjunctive constellations he has in mind are at once more modest and (potentially) more expansive than a conjuncture. In his understanding, disjunctive constellations are not in opposition to conjunctures; they may well be the critical kernel at the heart of a conjunctural sensitivity.

Finally, Lynne Segal reflects upon the specific state of higher education, from the perspective of someone leaving the sector after decades of engaged participation. Her essay joins a steady chorus of reflection thinking backwards over the last half century of extraordinary transformations in higher education. The industry is booming, more students than ever are entering

universities, yet the academy is seen as increasingly in crisis. Staff workloads keep mounting, student debt soaring, and staff and student anxieties alike are multiplying, even as government underfunding, imposed managerialism and commercialisation threaten to reduce the underlying logic of higher education to market principles. In this context, it is more urgent than ever to record the half century of struggle on the part of pioneers such as Segal (and Stuart Hall, among many others), to open-up and enrich academic life, gradually ensuring the entry of hitherto excluded voices and topics into research and scholarship, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Drawing on her own involvement, Segal recalls some of these always incomplete attempts to challenge the fault-lines of intellectual life in the academy, knowing that we need always to cherish the value of teaching, research and learning, simply for its own sake.