EDITORIAL

The present crisis and the questions we must ask

Alan Finlayson

One of the most surprising things about the success of the Leave campaign is that so many are surprised by it. Could we really have expected any other result – after forty years of misrepresentation of the EU by politicians and media alike, and in the midst of a calculated intensification of hostility towards immigrants? Thirty years after the abandonment of coal, steel and fishing industries and communities – eight years into a brutal and unnecessary regime of fiscal austerity imposed to save the banks – we may be shocked but there are no grounds to be surprised by the size and intensity of public mistrust of politics and rejection of the status quo. A post-referendum review of the polls conducted during the campaign suggests that in fact Leave was always ahead.[1] Of course it was.

The situation is not surprising; nevertheless, there is much we must learn from it. The referendum has clarified and illuminated a complex set of fractures which now define our nation: between north and south; former industrial centres and the places of the 'new' economy; rural and urban, inland and shoreline; those with a university education and those without; white collar and blue collar, skilled and unskilled; Eastern and Western Europeans, older and newer immigrants, those from the Commonwealth and those from the EU; older and younger; those who own a house or have a private pension and those who do not. As Will Davies has noted financialisation has produced distinct political divisions.[2] But their effects are, as we now say, 'intersectional'.

The situation demands immediate responses. There are old policies and positions to be defended as well as new ones to be formulated. But there is also a need for patient analyses which specify and measure the forces and contradictions of which referendum votes were expressions.

Renewal 24.3.indd 5 31/08/2016 11:15:12

Conjunctures

Often when the left asks 'what is to be done?' what we really mean is 'how can we construe things in such way that *we* are the answer'? But we need to be willing to look unblinkingly at our situation and simply ask 'what is it?' without preconceived answers in mind.

There are precedents for such an approach. Perry Anderson's and Tom Nairn's controversial 1960s studies of the *Origins of the Present Crisis,* showed how economic and political decline were linked to the peculiar failure of the first capitalist nation to adapt fully to modernity.[3] In the 1970s Stuart Holland in *The Socialist Challenge* recognized that the crisis of Keynesianism was linked to the growth of new kinds of capitalist enterprise – multinationals operating in markets for multiple products, and that this posed problems for national welfare states.[4] In the 1980s Stuart Hall and colleagues explained how the ideology of Thatcherism was connected to deeper cultural preoccupations with nationhood and crisis that were themselves part of a transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism.[5] In the 1990s, Anthony Giddens' Third Way analysed the profound impact of globalisation on politics, economics and culture.[6] His was a rather broad-brush analysis but its shallowness is instructive. Any interpretation of deep and long-term *sociological* trends which is not allied to a *political* analysis of the powers at work in and around the state will fail. And no one person can grasp all that has to be grasped. Academic specialisation and expansion are such that no individual can synthesise all the ideas for us. We have too many 'intellectual' gurus producing grand but thin statements about the end of something old (violence, nations, professionals), the coming dominance of something 'unprecedented' (amateurs, sharing, data) or the One Big Thing Nobody Has Ever Thought Of Before Which Can Explain Everything (the 'evolution' of emotions, the 'framing' of cognition, the Network).

What we need is what we have. Good, smart, thoughtful and experienced people, pooling resources and ideas in a common project. At *Renewal* we certainly do not know all the answers. We think we know some good questions. But we are certain that we know a lot of the people who can find out the right answers. Indeed, some of what we need to know has appeared in these pages. More of it is in academic journals, in pamphlets and books, waiting to be re-presented to general audiences. There is much work to be done consolidating, connecting and interpreting it all. Here are seven themes upon which we might think and about which – we hope – readers have things to say. They are not all there is to ask about. And they are certainly not discrete. They are a start.

Geographies

If we didn't know it before we surely know now that the political and economic geography of the UK is far from simple. To understand it we have to make sense of the ongoing reconfiguration of political relations between Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast and London. These will be a driving feature of the politics of 'Brexit'. But beneath all that is a slower and deeper shift in the balance of dependency between the centre (the political and economic capitals in London and the South) and the national periphery. That London is, in some domains, more closely connected to Frankfurt, New York and Moscow than it is to the UK has fuelled the centripetal forces forcing the Union apart. Perhaps the capital's decreased dependence on the resources of the rest of nation on which it once relied (people for armies, coal for fuel, corn for food) has made the consent of the majority of the country seem an irksome obligation for so grand a world-city. Independence for London is a fantasy but one which is growing in tandem with desires for independence from London – and in politics, fantasy can be forceful.

As analysts we cannot rely on fantasies. We need to be clearer about the history and present of spatial inequalities (the work of Danny Dorling and colleagues is essential here) and also about the geographical distribution of attitudes and experiences. Are these a function of place or of population movement and change? How many people live near to their place of birth? How many have never left it? How does geographical immobility link with life-chances and attitudes?[7] In short, we need to make better sense of the flows of resources and people in and out of regions (including both internal and external migration) and so better understand the multiple and evolving spatial inequalities which define experiences and identities.

Economies

A geographical focus draws our attention to the complexity of what/who is dependent on what/who and how. We cannot rely only on the old thesis of 'internal colonialism' (that the Celtic fringes are culturally and economically subjugated) when the urban centres are no longer so embedded as they once were within the production networks of the periphery, and the periphery is increasingly able to exercise autonomy. Finance is important of course (and will be a major issue in Brexit talks) but our interest in it, and in technology, innovation and transnational networks, must not block investigation into internal flows of core resources.[8] As well as working out what on earth we might export we need also to know what is happening inside our borders.

Renewal 24.3.indd 7 31/08/2016 11:15:12

Once upon a time magazines or journals such as ours might have published worthy reports on the rates of production of pig iron. Today, we could do with more articles on pigs. Exemplary work undertaken by researchers linked to the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change at Manchester University has indeed generated and analysed data on the organisation – and pathologies – of the UK pig meat supply chain.[9] They have also examined in detail the operation of debt-based financial engineering in the provision of adult care services.[10] Such work enables us to see our economies in new ways. We need to understand local, regional, national and international interdependencies, the flows of goods, people and investment and the powers this gives rise to. We need to know more about more of these supply chains, how they impact on localities and regions and the political and cultural responses this provokes.[11]

Ideologies

Is there today a form or style of thinking which integrates us into the economic and political system and legitimates our position within it? In the late nineteen-eighties it made sense for Tom Nairn to make fun of 'Ukania', with its arcane 'ancient' institutions and obsession with class topped off by the myth of the monarchy.[12] But who now learns at school to memorise the Kings and Queens of England? Our ancient universities still produce a ruling class but the only people who really believe that Oxford's PPE graduates are uniquely suited to governing are the PPE graduates from Oxford who have been in government. The national curriculum's focus on making us economically useful has decreased the extent to which mainstream schools effectively inculcate an ideology involving pride in, or knowledge of, a 'shared' heritage of 'one-thousand years of unbroken tradition'. We have no common religion, not even in the most attenuated sense – and not only because of increased religious diversity. A 2014 survey of parents of children and adolescents found that forty-six per cent did not recognize Noah's Ark as a Bible story (with a marked difference in knowledge between those over 55 and those aged 25-34).[13] In the absence of shared reference points how do we construct meaningful political and ethical appeals? How does a movement more Methodist then Marxist express its moral values? The standard political language of 'progressive' and 'reactionary' means nothing to most people.

The point is not that we are at the end of ideology but that it is not clear what 'the British people' (if that is a meaningful category) may be said to 'believe' about this world (let alone the next). Ironically, the mechanisms and institutions which once inculcated a common 'ideological' culture have been turned to the task of inculcating 'entrepreneurial' individualism, which weakens the capacity of cultural

Renewal 24.3.indd 8 31/08/2016 11:15:12

institutions to sustain the ideological forces which generate legitimacy (including the legitimacy of the institutions which inculcate individualism). There is no basis on which to build consensus; no agreement on the goals of our politics, and much skepticism of 'experts'. Our 'national imaginary' has fractured and one dimension of Leave was an expression of desire for the return of a stable cultural horizon against which life might be oriented. If we are to make sense of and respond to that then we need to draw on anthropological, historical and survey sources that can tell us more about the patterns of belief across the country and about the varied – internationalised – sources and forms of knowledge on which people draw.

Identities

For some time now, thinkers and commentators on the Left have been emphasising the importance of English identity. Mike Kenny – writing for *Renewal* in 2014 – argued that new Labour's 'championing of a liberal British nationhood' enhanced the appeal of an Englishness that expressed 'recoil against the political elite, increasingly perceived as metropolitan, out of touch, and condescending towards popular sensibilities'.[14] His thesis is confirmed by polling showing that those who identified as British were more likely to vote Remain whereas those who identified as English were more likely to vote Leave. But we are far from fully understanding the coordinates of the new Englishness.[15] We need a thick cultural historical sociology of how people in different places actually live and think. We need to account better for local attachments to local and regional cultures and traditions (think of regionally specific cuisine such as Hull's 'chip spice' or Teeside's 'Parma') which are rarely included within 'national' culture by curators who claim affinity with pluralism yet construe local variation as a 'backwards', countervailing force to the march of metropolitan progress.

We need also to be aware of the ways in which identity as such is changing. Perhaps the politicisation of English identity is one manifestation of trends in identity politics. When identity is no longer part of a taken for granted horizon within and against which we form a sense of self it comes to be experienced as a kind of individual achievement. A familiar politics of resistance to identities experienced as imposed (nationality, gender, sexuality and class) has become a (to some of us) unfamiliar politics centred on creating ever more refined, specific and individualised identities for which recognition is demanded. This has a radical force but is also congruent with (if not wholly complementary to) neoliberal culture; identity as a property to be claimed and defended. Is it possible that national identity has also become 'individualised' or 'privatised' in this way? In any case we need thicker and more empirical details as well as subtler theorisations so that we may map eco-

Renewal 24.3.indd 9 31/08/2016 11:15:12

nomic, geographic and generational differences in how identity is claimed and experienced.[16]

Communications

We know communication is changing, with the decline in print and broadcast media, the deskilling of journalism, the explosion of the public sphere into a shattered archipelago of inaccessible islands. Yet we need to know much more. Regis Debray argues that socialism was inextricably linked with the pamphlet – a form and genre which made possible the educative function of parties and movements centred on discussion groups and seminars, constituting a canon and an ideological tradition to which members might refer.[17] Digital political culture constitutes a very different relationship between people, information and communication; one which is simultaneously more 'democratic' than before – anyone can be a pundit or rude to a famous politician on Twitter – but also, perhaps for that reason, more paranoid and, because of the absence of stable intellectual authorities, more open to conspiracy theory.

Initial analysis suggests that Leave dominated on social media.[18] How important that was is not clear. But digital media has transformed political culture at the foundations, inducing political discourse that is at once more participatory and less inclusive, polemical, affective and driven by the affirmation of tightly bounded connectivity as much as by content. Those who adapt to this – such as Leave.eu funder Aaron Banks – prosper. But many in mainstream politics are (in Neal Lawson's phrase) doing Kodak politics in the era of Instagram. We need to know more about who is making what, how and with what results. There is excellent work in Media and Communication Studies that can tell us about – for example – new interactions between ideology and mediated expression, the influence of new kinds of online celebrity on younger people, the political and legal dimensions of internet regulation. All of this has to be brought into alignment with what we know about voting, economies, identities and political ideologies.[19]

Technologies

We need to understand how economy, culture and ideology are shaped and reshaped by digitisation in the largest sense: the internet but also robotics, big data and surveillance. The ideological counterpart to this emergent regime is Silicon Valley libertarianism, something evident on the Leave side of the referendum in the persons of Steve Hilton and, less obviously but more importantly, head of the Vote

Leave campaign Dominic Cummings. The latter is typical of contemporary technology-oriented utopian libertarians seemingly happy to make the country, in the words of Will Davies 'a kind of experiment in new fusions of technology, science, policy and regulation, driven by entrepreneurs whose main ambition is to destroy the status quo'.[20] In this context the Right are streets ahead. There are excellent analyses coming from the Left which need knitting together; the so-called accelerationists for example, or the work of Shoshanna Zuboff from Harvard Business School, who has warned that unlike their industrial ('Fordist') counterparts, firms which profit from endless data extraction have no structural dependence on populations as a source of either workers or customers.[21] People are instead sources of what she calls 'surveillance assets'. The capacity to track employees' every movement or keystroke, and to adjust price or pay in real time, points, she argues, to the supplanting of economic and social relations based on contract and law with 'the rewards and punishments of a new kind of invisible hand'.[22] The referendum gave voice to a desire to 'take back control'; it meant many things but the phrase resonates with many of us for whom the workplace is dominated by technologies which monitor, measure and evaluate.

Politics

When it comes to politics we know – or think we know – a lot of the story: the decline of 'intermediate' institutions in civil society, what Peter Mair called the 'hollowing out' of political parties and democratic associations, the professionalisation of politicians staffing 'cartel parties'. We know a bit – but could stand to know more – about the changing patterns of occupational movement in and out of party and government machines, which has evidently led to a decline in the capacity of many political actors (many of whom are simply *en route* to more lucrative jobs in media or international charities). From where will come new generations of experienced and able politicians?

All that we have looked at so far changes the ways in which people acquire a politics, act politically, and make political alliances. Critics of Corbyn often make the mistake of thinking that his rise is no more than the kind of entryism which was prominent in the nineteen-eighties. That is to profoundly misread the moment. Blairism was the last of something old, not the first of something new. Its mass 'retail offer' politics is ill-adapted to today. Corbyn's 'boutique' offer of affecting identity politics is the more contemporary phenomenon. But it is not at all clear how that kind of 'social movement' can be connected with the party, electoral and Parliamentary systems of British politics (which themselves are in want of change).

Renewal 24.3.indd 11 31/08/2016 11:15:12

We are living through an intense contradiction. Technological, cultural, social and economic change generate new variations on old wrongs, while also generating new demands for new forms of equality and participation. But our political system is structured for two-party politics and a hierarchy of decision-making. Into the void between system and demand, across Western democracies, has stepped all kinds of populism. Here, then, is a job for political theory. We have mediating political institutions for good reasons: opinions must be aggregated, issues articulated, stable compromises established. We need analytical and evaluative principles able to comprehend – and direct – politics. Some of these principles will concern the practicalities of constitutions, parties and partisanship, others will concern reformulations of our thinking about the multiple dimensions of equality and justice.[23]

The work to be done

These are just seven of the things we need to talk about. We know there are more. Understanding each is a challenge; making sense of their interaction even more so. But we think it can be done. One of the achievements of Thatcherism was to separate scholars, activists and publics. Scholars are crushed by their workloads and their efforts directed at inward looking assessment exercises; activists shorn of ideological tradition – and appalled by what they see around them – may be inclined to leap before looking; publics have been encouraged to dismiss all experts. Against that fragmentation, in our editorial statement we are clear that this journal must be a venue for 'new insights and ideas, drawn from international comparisons and collaboration with neglected corners of academia and activism' and we demand 'searching critique and understanding of the political, social, economic, cultural and international contexts'. We must understand the continued movement of our collective life if we are to intervene effectively into it; and if it is to be real understanding it must be done collectively and iteratively. We look forward to working alongside you.

Alan Finlayson is Professor of Political & Social Theory at the University of East Anglia and Chair of the Editorial Board of *Renewal*.

References

1 H.D.Clarke, M.Goodwin and P.Whitely, 'Leave was always in the lead: why the polls got the referendum result wrong', *Europe, European Politics and Policy Blog*, LSE, 2016, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/07/12/leave-always-lead/.

2 W.Davies, 'What sort of crisis is this?', PERCblog, 2016, http://www.perc.org.uk/project_posts/what-sort-of-crisis-is-this/.

Renewal 24.3.indd 12 31/08/2016 11:15:12

3 P.Anderson, ‘Origins of the present crisis’, *New Left Review,* 23, 1964; T.Nairn, ‘The English working class’, *New Left Review,* 24, 1964.

4 S.Holland, *The Socialist Challenge,* London, Quartet 1975.

5 S.Hall and M.Jacques, eds., *New times: the changing face of politics in the 1990s,* London, Lawrence & Wishart 1990.

6 A.Giddens, *The Third Way: the renewal of social democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press 1998.

7 See T.Bell, ‘The referendum, living standards and inequality’, The Resolution Foundation, 2016, http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/media/blog/the-referendum-living-standards-and-inequality/.

8 See H.Thompson and L.S.Talani, ‘The Impact of Brexit on the City and the British Economic Model’, 2016, ‘*Diverging Capitalisms?’ Series*, Brief 1, Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute, http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2016/07/18/the-impact-of-brexit-on-the-city-and-the-british-economic-model-new-brief/.

9 A.Bowman, J.Froud, S.Johal, J.Law, A.Leaver and K.Williams ‘Bringing Home the Bacon: From Trader Mentalities to Industrial Policy’, CRESC, June 2012, http://www.cresc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Bringing home the bacon.pdf.

10 D.Burns, L.Cowie, J.Earle, P.Folkman, J.Froud, P.Hyde, S.Johal, I.R.Jones, A.Killett, K.Williams, ‘Where Does the Money Go? Financialised Chains and the Crisis in Residential Care, CRESC, 2016, http://www.cresc.ac.uk/medialibrary/research/WDTMG FINAL -01-3-2016.pdf.

11 See, for instance, work by CRESC centred on Enfield: A.Sitkin, ‘Tales from the frontline of regeneration’, *Soundings*, 52, 2012,; J.Froud, S.Johal, M.Moran, and K. Williams, ‘Must the ex-industrial regions fail’, *Soundings,* 52, 2012; A.Sitkin, ‘Enfield: new directions with big business’, *Soundings,* 55, 2013. For strategies to supporting local wealth creation and distribution see M.Brown and M.O’Neill, ‘The Road to Socialism is the A59: The Preston Model’, *Renewal*, 24, 2016.

12 T.Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy*, London, Radius 1988.

13 C. D.Field, ‘Bible Literacy and Other News’, *British Religion in Numbers*, Feb. 2014 http://www.brin.ac.uk/2014/bible-literacy-and-other-news/.

14 See, for example, the symposium on Michael Kenny’s book *The Politics of Englishness* in *Renewal,* 22, 2014.

15 In England, leave voters (thirty-nine per cent) were more than twice as likely as remain voters (eighteen per cent) to describe themselves either as ‘English not British’ or ‘more English than British’. Remain voters were twice as likely as leavers to see themselves as more British than English. Two thirds of those who considered themselves more English than British voted to leave; two thirds of those who considered themselves more British than English voted to remain. M.Ashcroft, ‘How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why’, 24.6.16, http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/.

16 See, for example, B.Little, ‘A Growing Discontent: Class and Generation Under Neoliberalism’ in S.Hall, D.Massey and M.Rustin, eds., *The Kilburn Manifesto*, London, Lawrence & Wishart 2015.

17 R.Debray, ‘Socialism: A Life Cycle’, *New Left Review*, 46, 2007.

Renewal 24.3.indd 13 31/08/2016 11:15:12

18 V. Polonski, 'Impact of social media on the outcome of the EU referendum', 2016, http://www.referendumanalysis.eu/eu-referendum-analysis-2016/section-7-social-media/impact-of-social-media-on-the-outcome-of-the-eu-referendum/; S.Usherwood and K.Wright, 'Talking past each other: the Twitter campaigns', 2016, http://www.referendumanalysis.eu/eu-referendum-analysis-2016/section-7-social-media/talking-past-each-other-the-twitter-campaigns/.

19 N.Fenton, *Digital, Political, Radical*, Wiley; London 2016; B.Cammaerts, A.Mattoni and P.McCurdy (eds.) *Mediation and protest movements,* Intellect, Bristol 2013. J.Street, 'Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?, *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations, 14, 3*, 2012, pp346–356; S.Dredge, 'Why are You Tube Stars so popular?', The Guardian, 3 February, 2016; P.Bernal, *Internet Privacy Rights: Rights to Protect Autonomy*, CUP, Cambridge 2014.

20 W.Davies, 'Liberalism After Brexit', 2016, http://www.perc.org.uk/project_posts/liberalism-after-brexit/; see also my earlier 'Cameron, Culture and the Creative Class: The Big Society and the Post-Bureaucratic Age', *Political Quarterly*, 82,2012.

21 N.Srnicek and A.Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, London, Verso 2015.

22 S.Zuboff, 'Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization', *Journal of Information Technology*, 30, 2015.

23 L.Ypi and J.White, 'The new partisanship', *Renewal*, 24, 2016; D. Owen, 'Breaking the impasse: how to avoid a Labour split', *Open Democracy*, 14.7.16,https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/david-owen/breaking-impasse-how-to-avoid-labour-split.

Renewal 24.3.indd 14 31/08/2016 11:15:13