CLASS, CULTURE, BLUE LABOUR

Who's 'Normal'? Class, Culture and Labour Politics in a Fragmented Britain

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In political discourse in recent decades, class has been repositioned as an essentially cultural historical phenomenon rather than a dynamic, lived reality connected to the changing temporalities of British capitalism. This is visible in SNP rhetoric as well as in Labour's current 'culture wars'. But Labour must reconnect with an economic analysis of class, for it is this that could in fact reunite the culturally polarised elements of a Labour electoral coalition.

Owen Smith's declaration that he was 'normal' provoked one of the major controversies of the 2016 Labour leadership contest. In the initial fallout most of the controversy focused on the alleged heteronormative content of buttressing his assertion with 'I've got a wife and three children'. Less was stated about the revealing elements of the cultural politics of class in Smith's statement. Smith claimed that *'I can bring that normality, that sense of what our communities*

want'.[1] This was clearly situated within a cultural reading of class, community and 'normality' which extends far beyond sexual orientation. Smith implied this further in a later statement which got to the heart of fissures between Labour's urban and traditional industrial working class support bases:

Well, I think Jeremy doesn't really understand sometimes, the way in which people have a very strong, perhaps socially conservative – conservative with a small c – sense of place. Sense of where they're from. I'm not sure I've heard him talking much about Scotland and identity, or Wales and identity or indeed about England and identity.

I suspect that Jeremy's got a rather more metropolitan sense of that, and that's not one I think that is central to the Labour tradition.[2]

Smith's juxtaposition of Labour's 'metropolitan' leadership with the socially conservative working class from small-town England, the South Wales valleys, and central Scotland, played into an argument which had been bolstered by the regionally and nationally polarised results of the EU referendum. However, these debates have a longer history in recent years including concern over the growth of the BNP and UKIP, and the rise of Scottish nationalism. Alarm in Labour circles has been spurred by these political forces' claims to represent popular sentiment against a distant 'metropolitan elite'. The clearest and most consistent response to this has been *Blue Labour* which premises party renewal on 'reconnecting with people as they are – as human beings who belong to families, localities and communities and who are embedded in shared traditions, interests and faiths.'[3] In a less coherent form this theme has been a consistent presence within internal Labour discussion. Class has re-emerged as a key category in Labour discussion and it is quite clear that the traditional, as opposed to Blairite, right of the party sees it as a crucial factor in discussing future strategy. However, rather than conventional labour movement explanations of class predicated on a structural analysis of social conflict it is increasingly elements of cultural identities relating to consumption patterns and regional and national affiliations that are emphasised.

To some extent this has the appearance of Raymond Williams' 'structure of feeling'; the different life-worlds and experiences of parts of the UK necessitate expressions in distinct political outlooks that reflect contrasting sets of cultural values embedded in social routines and communities.[4] Whilst the labour movement was without doubt historically built and sustained by making appeals based on common culture and life experiences, this was not the crux of its agenda. The Labour Party was able to overcome divisions of far greater magnitude over 'social issues', and to deliver a relatively stable electoral coalition. It did so by elevating arguments that emphasised class as a category based on wealth, power and resources, and convincing socially conservative constituencies that the benefit of workplace and societal empowerment outweighed the price of social reform. A Labour voting coalition of metropolitan

professionals and industrial working class communities was constructed and sustained on this basis between the 1920s and 1970s. Over the long mid-twentieth century Labour was also able to present itself as a regional and national champion. Although this met with varying degrees of success over the period, in both Scotland and Wales Labour became viewed as a natural 'national', as well as class-based, voice; the party acted as a representative of distinct polities within the unitary state.[5] Willie Ross, Secretary of State for Scotland 1964-1970 and 1974-1976, personified this stance. Although known as 'the hammer of the Nats', and as a staunch opponent of devolution, he positioned himself as a champion of Scottish interests within the British state, and was able to use his role and Labour government policy to achieve a favourable distribution of employment and investment in Scotland.[6]

The state of the Union was not at the forefront of discussion over the fragmentation of a possible British road to socialism in the late 1970s despite the Scottish devolution referendum debacle of 1979. Eric Hobsbawm's famous diagnosis of the 'Forward March of Labour Halted' centred on how 'a collection of localised industrial communities' had given way to 'a growing division of workers into sectional groups' acting to secure limited economic gains.[7]

By the mid-1980s this debate had more definitely broadened into a consideration of how the labour movement should respond to an increasingly fragmenting UK. David Howell's *A Lost Left* enunciated these concerns in a chapter on the strategic vantage that posited John Wheatley and the Scottish Labour Party's embrace of a unitary British approach to socialism. His conclusion questioned the wisdom and possibility of the left maintaining an affiliation towards a multi-national British state through the labour movement defeats incurred under Thatcherism and the national political dynamics these stimulated.[8] Howell's perceptive analysis has become a living nightmare for Scottish Labour in recent years, but elements of it are also present within the stultified discussion over region, English-ness and Britain. Within this discourse the foundations of Labour's radical political legacy, and class identity, have been contested in party political terms. But class has been repositioned as an essentially cultural historical phenomenon rather than a dynamic, lived reality connected to the changing temporalities of British capitalism.

This has been particularly apparent within the SNP's successful attempt to claim ownership of the 'Labour tradition' in Scotland. Mhairi Black, elected member of Paisley and Renfrewshire South at the general election in 2015, has sought to personify this, and did so most clearly in her maiden speech:

> I like many SNP members come from a traditional socialist Labour family and I have never been quiet in my assertion that I feel that it is the Labour party that left me, not the other way about. The SNP did not triumph on a wave of nationalism; in fact nationalism has nothing to do with what's happened in Scotland. We triumphed on a wave of hope, hope that there was something

different, something better to the Thatcherite neo-liberal policies that are produced from this chamber.[9]

This narrative has been developed over time, with frequent references to Scottish Labour having 'lost its way', and becoming an enforcer of distant authority rather than a force for delivering social change rooted in working-class communities. It was epitomised when senior trade union activists involved in the 1971 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' (UCS) 'work-in' followed the trajectory of Jimmy Reid, the iconic leader of the dispute who died in 2010, having switched affiliation successively from Communist to Labour to SNP, by supporting Scottish independence at the 2014 referendum. They promoted this position in an open letter to Scotland's main tabloid, the *Daily Record*, in terms which underlined Labour's failure to respond to deindustrial-isation: 'For decades, decisions to close the yards were taken by doctrinaire Tory and Labour governments who disregarded the hopes of the people who live here.'[10] Left-wing independence referendum narratives and the support the SNP has gained on alleged 'traditional Labour' grounds also speak to their ossification. In particular, worker agency and activism of the variety that produced the UCS work-in are neglected in favour of a 'civic nationalist' politics that will allegedly continue to assert the loosely ascribed values and striving for 'social justice' that these earlier struggles embodied.

In the English context the same forces – deindustrialisation and labour movement decline – have similarly spurred an imaginary of the working class which is in large part historical. It is an outlook that ignores the contemporary realities of the adverse housing and labour market experiences that are reshaping class in Britain today in favour of a cultural juxtaposition between locations that obviously lost from 'global-ization' in small town England, and the 'metropolitan' areas seen to have gained most from it. But unlike in Scotland there is no stable institutional apparatus or political rallying point for these impulses. An unstated confusion over where English and British national identity start and stop, and lack of a clear constitutional end to this agenda, has manifested itself in growing 'culture war' politics that have manifested themselves within the Labour Party. Key examples of this included the 'white van man' incident when Emily Thornberry, MP for Islington South and Finsbury, and now Shadow Defence Secretary, was attacked for a tweet of a house surrounded by a white van and St George's flag.[11] Another was when Wes Streeting, MP for Illford, opposed a decision to reject McDonald's' sponsorship of the Labour Party conference as indicative of prejudices against working class culinary habits:

> It smacks of a snobby attitude towards fast-food restaurants and people who work or eat at them. ... McDonald's may not be the trendy falafel bar that some people in politics like to hang out at but it's enjoyed by families across the country.[12]

In both cases Labour's left were presented as out of touch with working class feeling. Streeting suspended criticisms of McDonald's tax affairs and employment

practices to rally behind plebeian consumption patterns. Structural analysis and the possibility of mobilisation and change were dropped in favour of advancing an unlikely brand of fast food identity politics. In the case of Emily Thornberry the absence of a class politics based around questions of wealth and power was even more apparent. The 'white van man', who has historically been a folk character associated with small business, was ascribed an unproblematic working class identity which was fundamentally related to national affiliations and patriotism. Furthermore he was then juxtaposed to professional metropolitan types, regardless of their own employment situation, on grounds of cultural values.

Various forces within the English left have long sought to construct an alternative form of national identity, from E.P Thompson's post-1956 'New Left' mission to uncover a lost history of radicalism to Billy Bragg's *The Progressive Patriot*.[13] However, it seems unlikely that such a project can possibly succeed. As Paul Mason stated in his refutation of attempts to construct a positive English identity 'what it means to be English is completely subordinate to class, region, ethnicity and local culture'.[14] It is precisely the subaltern character of the assertions of English-ness, and the complex combination of resentment and hope they harbour, that makes them both slippery from a Labour perspective, and also difficult to neatly contain within a project for Labour Party renewal.

 Any such effort will need alertness to the realities of regional dispersion and distance. However, it will need a far greater awareness of the structural socioeconomic realities that are continuing to remake class – and which affect the metropolitan elements of Labour's coalition every bit as much as former industrial settlements. The most intellectually developed elements of the cultural class argument, *Blue Labour*, claim an origin in a Labour tradition of communitarian localism. However, their perspective is devoid of Labourism's orientation towards workplace empowerment. Whatever elements of ''Small c' conservatism' this contains, the implicit radicalism of a politics centred on disputing work and ownership and control of resources cannot be ignored.[15] Over the summer ongoing efforts to develop a proposal for federalism were suspended by the leadership contest. The risk of a class politics read in historicised terms is precisely to omit the key factors that could in fact unite the culturally polarised elements of a Labour electoral coalition. Corbyn's emphatic victory obliges the Labour left to put forward its own response to the widespread feeling of disempowerment, a response which must be sensitive to community and regional experience and identity. This will have to combine major proposals for constitutional reform and decentralisation, addressing the plight of both Scotland and Wales and English regions, with an agenda for economic democracy and the geographical redistribution of wealth and power.

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Notes

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2   M. Smith, 'Owen Smith says Jeremy Corbyn doesn't understand patriotism and national identity', *Mirror* 26.7.16, http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/owen-smith-says-jeremy-corbyn-8493150#.

3   A. Pabst, 'Renewing a Demoralised Labour Party and a Divied Kingdom', *Blue Labour,* 2.6.16, http://www.bluelabour.org/2015/06/02/renewing-a-demoralised-labour-party-and-a-divided-kingdom/.

4   R. Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Broadview Press, 1961, reprint, p64.

5   P. Ward, *Unionism in the United Kingdom, 1918-1974,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp3-5.

6   T.M. Devine, 'The Challenge of Unionism', in *Scotland and the Union,* ed. T.M. Devine, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p144.

7   E. Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', *Marxism Today,* September 1978, pp283-4.

8   D. Howell, *A Lost Left,* Manchester University Press, 1986.

9   M. Black, 'Mhairi Black Maiden Speech In Full', *Independent*, 15.7.15, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/mhairi-black-speech-in-full-snp-mp-tears-apart-conservative-government-and-labour-opposition-in-10389334.html

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12 C. Mortimer, 'Labour Accused of Snobbery after 'Blocking McDonalds from Party Conference'' *Independent,* 17.4.16, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-accused-of-snobbery-by-labour-backbencher-over-allegedly-blocking-mcdonalds-from-a6988726.html.

13 E.P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', *Socialist Register,* 1965; B. Bragg, *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging*, Bantam Press, 2006.

14 P. Mason, 'I Do Not Want to be English', *Guardian,* 10.5.16, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/10/snp-english-national-identity-class-cultural-divide.

15 R. Davis, 'Labour's Conservative Tradition' in *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics,* ed. Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst, I.B. Taurus, 2015, p197.