

LABOUR'S IDENTITY AND LABOUR'S STRATEGY

Roundtable: The politics of class, past and present

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In recent years, the idea of the working class has been appropriated by the right and defined in an exclusionary, white and socially conservative mould. Four historians of the labour movement, class, race and gender discuss what the left can do to fight back.

Laura Schwartz: In the past five years, class has returned to the political mainstream, with a very particular interpellation of the 'white working class' mobilised as a political and historical truth. Theresa May's speech as prime minister to the Conservative Party Conference in 2016, made shortly after the referendum in which Britain voted to leave the European Union, referred to 'ordinary working-class people' and 'working-class families' eight times.¹ Rapidly repositioning herself and the leadership of the Conservative Party as supporters of Brexit, May adopted the language of class to reflect the widespread perception that the success of the Leave campaign could be attributed to a disaffected working-class vote.

Subsequent research has shown that this is, in fact, a flawed analysis of the referendum results: social classes D and E ('semi-skilled' and 'unskilled' manual occupations) made up only 24 per cent of the Leave vote, while 3 in 5 Brexit votes came from those in social classes A, B and C1 (managerial and/or professional occupations).² There nonetheless remains a widespread popular belief that in June 2016 the working class spoke, and this belief continues to shape contemporary politics.³ The Conservative Party's electoral success in 2019, for example, was also widely attributed to its ability to appeal to 'ordinary' working-class people in former Labour heartlands.⁴

In the lead-up to the referendum UKIP worked hard to portray itself as representing the interests of 'ordinary British workers' over that of 'the establishment'.⁵ The Leave.EU campaign, in which UKIP leader Nigel Farage played a prominent role, constructed migrant workers as an economic threat to the British working class, holding migrants rather than employers responsible for undercutting wages.⁶ This rhetoric continued long after the referendum. When the Labour Party Conference voted in favour of free movement of people in September 2019, Leave.EU described this on Twitter as 'Flying in the face of 4 million Labour voters who backed Brexit – good, honest working-class people who have legitimate concerns about unsustainable levels of immigration'.⁷

The 'working class' remained an important feature of Leave.EU's social media during the 2019 general election and following Britain's eventual withdrawal from the EU in 2020. In March 2020 one blog described Home Secretary Priti Patel's pledge to drastically reduce immigration as being 'on the side of the British working class'.⁸ The Twitter account for the other anti-EU platform Vote to Leave (mainly backed by members of the Conservative Party) only made passing reference to the 'working class' in the run-up to the June 2016 vote. But once it had re-branded itself as Change Britain after the referendum, it began to deploy this trope more frequently, claiming in 2019, as the Labour Party moved towards support for a second referendum, that Labour's 'Brexit policy is an insult to the working class ...'.⁹

This new interest in working-class people was not limited to pro-Leave platforms. A LexisNexis search of 11 UK-wide British newspapers and tabloids (see table below) reveals 59,329 mentions of the term 'working class' between 2015 and 2020, compared to only 11,385 mentions between 1999 and 2004.¹⁰ The centre left and generally pro-EU newspaper *The Guardian*, for example, mentioned the 'working class' 7,380 times in the five years following the announcement of the EU referendum in 2015, as compared to only 1,598 times during Prime Minister Tony Blair's ascendancy.

Frequency of occurrence of the term ‘working class’ 1999 to 2020

Publication	Number of times the term ‘working class’ appeared 1/1/1999-1/1/2004	Number of times the term ‘working class’ appeared 22/2/2015-19/7/2020
<i>Independent</i>	2,559	5,017
<i>Guardian</i>	1,598	7,380
<i>Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday</i>	1,212	1,378
<i>The Times</i>	1,998	4,304
<i>Sun</i>	570	1,966
<i>Financial Times</i>	111	2,717
<i>Daily Star</i>	145	324
<i>The Express</i>	613	659
<i>New Statesman</i>	499	640
<i>Sunday Times</i>	820	1,130
<i>Spectator</i>	127	337
TOTAL	10,252	25,852

Source: LexisNexis search

This renewed interest in class is not neutral, but constructs ‘the working class’ in a very particular way: as homogeneously white (and therefore anti-immigrant), heterosexual (and therefore pro-family values), and male (currently or formerly employed in manual/industrial occupations).¹¹ This definition of the working class has come to dominate despite, or perhaps because of, the last forty years of de-industrialisation, the rise of a feminised workforce in a service-sector economy, and a working class that is more ethnically diverse than ever before.

History and public memory play a crucial role in the new class politics. There is widespread nostalgia for a golden age of working-class affluence and a thriving manufacturing economy before the ravages of de-industrialisation took hold. More subtle are the temporal implications of the frequently-cited notion of ‘left behind’ places, which, in suggesting that the modern world has moved on too quickly, calls into question much of the social change that has occurred since the late 1960s, including the achievements of anti-racist, feminist and gay liberation movements.

'Red wall' seats, and working-class voters, are imagined as white, socially and culturally conservative, and as increasingly alienated from Labour (which is constructed as multicultural, metropolitan and progressive). The first question we need to ask about the contemporary politics of class is: how and why has the Tory version of the 'working class' come to be so culturally dominant?

George Stevenson: It's striking that in the same period that Laura is talking about, between 2015 and 2019, while the Conservatives have shifted back to talking about the working class, the Labour Party has been very reluctant to construct its own narrative about social class in Britain. Labour politicians often speak about 'working people' but rarely about a working *class*. Jeremy Corbyn and other prominent figures were comfortable in pushing back against economic hegemony around austerity, but far less so in linking their policy prescriptions to a deeper, repeatable construction of class interests and politics. And this is despite the fact that talking about class has been of no detriment to the Tories, and has apparently helped them win over some ex-Labour voters and Labour seats.

There have, of course, been voices on the left trying to contest the Tory narrative. In May 2019, an independent film-making group led by the late Simon Baker, Labour Voices, released a video on Facebook with the tagline, 'The working class is the working class, regardless of skin colour'. The video was presented by a Labour Party member and activist in Nottinghamshire, Guy Matthews, who identified himself in the video as precisely the kind of person who conservative narratives would classify as part of the 'white working class'. However, rather than leaning into this classification, the video directly challenged the ideological foundations of a specifically *white* working class: 'The UKIPer thinks that the white working class is very important, specifically the white part. I don't. I think that the working class is the working class, regardless of skin colour.' This approach was coupled with a focus on the economic concerns of working-class people – pay, bills, debt – that sought to construct a counter-formation of the working class around shared economic interests. The film offered a different version of class, more solidaristic, more concerned with class *struggle* than class *identity*, and with roots in British labour history. Within 24 hours, the video had been watched over half a million times on Facebook and shared widely across other social media, often uncredited.¹²

This was clearly a popular film, but it had no affiliation to Labour's official communications. Corbyn's Labour failed to tell its own story about the working class, or, often, even to try. The signals from Starmer's Labour are even worse. This fits into a long pattern within Labour politics: the party has long feared a too-great identification with the 'working class', imagined as powerful trade unions of manual workers supposedly 'holding the country to ransom'. This was visible in the 1970s, and it

became even more pronounced in the late 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, under Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair. Labour was afraid that using the language of the ‘working class’ would make them seem old-fashioned, out of step with affluent, aspirational new class fragments. When New Labour wanted to talk about working-class neighbourhoods, they used the language of community, not of class – as with the ‘New Deal for Communities’, for example.

However, Labour’s reluctance to use the language of class may owe as much to the dominance of moralistic strains of socialism in the party as to strategic analysis. As Jeremy Gilbert has identified, Corbynism was organised predominantly around moral critiques of Conservative cruelty, leading to a ‘wouldn’t it be nice ...?’ form of political contestation.¹³ The 2017 election slogan, ‘For the Many, not the Few’, hinted at a more antagonistic form of class politics, but the party’s leadership and spokespeople left it undeveloped.

Thus far, Keir Starmer’s Labour has also avoided discussing class. This silence, however, may be preferable to any further elucidation of the a-political, a-historical, a-social view of the British working class proffered by his Director of Policy, Claire Ainsley, for whom, as Alan Finlayson has noted in this journal, class is not an expression of social and economic interests but a collection of moral sentiments that can be ‘triggered’ by the right symbolic framing.¹⁴ Ainsley’s suggestion of putting ‘family, fairness, hard work and decency’ at the centre of any future class politics would not be out of place in the mouth of Theresa May or Boris Johnson, or a future Conservative Party leader.¹⁵

If the Labour Party wishes to build a different society, it must start by contesting these narratives by offering its own story of solidarity and agency, drawing on a range of historical examples to do so. The consequence of Labour’s lack of a narrative about the working class has been to cede the field to the Conservatives’ discursive construction of the British working class, which some of the party’s current advisors seem worryingly comfortable with.

Aditya Sarkar: To put the same thought more polemically, I’d say that within the channels of mainstream as well as supposedly ‘alternative’ public discourse in this country, the ‘working class’ has come to mean angry white home-owners speaking in a regional accent, who love their country and hate foreigners and liberals. This is invariably phrased not simply as an empirical account of the presence of racism and right reaction within working-class communities (there is and always has been plenty of evidence of this), but as a definition of working-class identity itself. So there’s been a distinctive, ethnonationalist ‘capture’ of the concept of the working class. It’s vital we reflect on this capture, and think about how we can confront it critically as labour historians.

In fact, I think there are two key ways of plausibly confronting and resisting this tidal right-wing logic. The first of these is, as George indicates, to tell alternative histories of class and class struggle, to give us a glimpse into the heterogeneity of working-class formation in modern British history. This kind of work points to traditions of radical struggle that are erased by the racialised and nationalist conception of class put forward by Brexiters and the new right. Crucially, such histories also point to struggles over and within class identity that disturb homogenising conceptions of social being. These approaches connect directly to the rich traditions of radical labour history in the UK, in the tracks laid down by E.P. Thompson, for example, and by feminist and anti-racist labour historians.

Laura Schwartz: Precisely. Part of our project must be to disrupt narrow definitions of who counts as working class. People of colour have been part of British working-class communities for centuries. They have played a crucial role in labour movement struggles to improve the living and working conditions of 'ordinary' working-class people.¹⁶ Women workers were central to the industrial revolution, as factory workers as well as the servants and housewives who 'reproduced' the capitalist workforce. Despite a male-dominated trade union movement, women also organised in their workplaces and came out on strike, including in some of the most high-profile cases of industrial action witnessed in post-war Britain.¹⁷ Queer identities and non-normative sexual practices at times had more space in working-class communities than higher up the social scale.¹⁸

George Stevenson: Given the lack of leadership from the Labour Party on this issue, I think the burden falls on historians, social scientists, community groups, activists, political movements, alternative media, art and cultural institutions, and whatever else remains of our degraded public sphere, to provide these counter-narratives.

It's vital that we demonstrate how class has frequently been used as a basis for solidarity across other forms of political oppression, and, significantly, of solidarity for other workers coming from those same white, male manual workers who are supposed nowadays to be allied to right-wing political forces. Consider the Grunwick dispute, where strikers were supported by mass picketing from across the labour movement, including large contingents from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and the perception amongst some of those workers that this was 'the most important picket since the miners' strike was won at Saltley': all this was done in support of a strike by mostly South Asian women in a photo-processing plant in London.¹⁹

Similarly, Diarmaid Kelliher has written powerfully on the lines of solidarity between a whole host of leftist groups, from lesbian and gay activists to feminists, trade unionists and constituency Labour Parties during the 1984-5 miners' strike.²⁰ Groups like Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) provided financial and

political backing for the miners, and this support was reciprocated by the NUM, who went on to raise LGBT issues at Labour Conferences, and sent an NUM contingent to the London Pride march after the strike.²¹

This show of solidarity between LGSM and the overwhelmingly white working-class miners was dramatised in the 2014 film, *Pride*. The film performed well at the box office and was nominated for a BAFTA, highlighting once more the potential for these alternative narratives of the British working class to resonate with the public. Add this to the fact that the Labour Party's push for a 'Green Industrial Revolution' could have drawn on the history of solidarity between workers and environmental protestors – such as the links between the Reclaim the Streets movement and the Liverpool dockworkers' dispute in the 1990s – and it's clear that a story of a reactionary British working class need not stand uncontested.²²

In short, there are a plethora of usable pasts that illustrate the working class as an agent of social action *and* as a political formation based on solidarities that cut across gender, race and sexuality. Not only that: these stories are often *popular* with British audiences.

Julia Laite: This is true, but it's also the case that labour history hasn't always given equal attention to *all* forms of labour, or all those who we might see as part of the working class. Labour history has tended to focus on trade unions and radical working-class movements, and those have tended to be dominated by men. Labour history has also only just begun to really reckon with ideas of intimate labour and casual feminised labour. This is changing – see, for example, Laura's work on domestic service in the late Victorian and Edwardian period.²³ I think it's safe to say that labour history could still do far more to bring this kind of labour into the frame. In fact, I've found more frameworks to work with on this topic within international labour history, where there are a number of people working on feminised casual/migrant/intimate labour; and on the ways in which international organisations (the ILO and the League of Nations and later the UN) have consistently struggled to bring these forms of work within view and control: in other words, within global labour standards, regulations and conventions.²⁴

The exclusion of women's work from our narratives can be broadly understood as working in two ways, in parallel with each other: labour organisations and policy-makers have struggled to understand and include work like domestic service and sexual labour in their frameworks; and labour historians, often working with sources produced by and about those organisations, have struggled to do the same.

Laura Schwartz: Of course, there's a danger of romanticising the past, of countering contemporary depictions of an essentially reactionary working class with comforting tales about queer and anti-racist working-class cultures. Britain also

has a long history of working-class racism, which needs not just to be acknowledged but also interrogated in order to understand why it has been so easy for right-wing politicians to position racism and xenophobia as the 'legitimate concerns' of 'honest' working-class people.²⁵ Right now, the question of who gets to lay claim to a working-class identity is highly contested, but this has always to some extent been the case. Race and gender have been key fault lines upon which people have been excluded from narrow definitions of the working class. At the same time as offering alternative histories, we also need to grapple with why the white, male industrial worker continues to have such purchase on the public and political imagination.

Julia Laite: Sex workers are some of the most interesting monkey-wrenches in political debates about class and who gets to be considered as working class. Sex workers complicate things. Firstly, because two centuries of discourse and law has systematically worked to create 'the prostitute' as a class apart from ordinary society, rather than sex workers being seen as very much part of their communities, as they almost always are. Labour historians still don't quite engage adequately with the dynamic of transactional sex within working-class communities; with the whole spectrum of transactional sex; and the issue of whether – and how – we should classify it as 'work' or 'not work'. Research on the history of prostitution does do a great job of this, though. I'm thinking here especially of Elizabeth Clement's book *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945*, in which she considers prostitution as part of a spectrum of sexual relationships and economic transactions within the early twentieth-century working class in New York City.²⁶ I would add that transactional sex can also be a form of sex abuse, but it is also still a form of labour. This is something that historians can especially bring to present day debates about whether sex work is work. Labour history highlights the fundamental fact that for most workers in most of history, 'work' has been coerced, exploitative, and often abusive. Calling something 'work' does not mean we are calling it 'empowering'. Sex work forces us to rethink neoliberal discourses of work, empowerment and identity.

Of course, another way that sex workers challenge categorisations of class is that they aren't all from the working class. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that women from middle-class families engaged in sex work. Prostitution is a job but it's not always done because of severe economic need, and it's not only working-class women who find themselves experiencing acute and severe economic need. Sex work brings us back to the perennial question: what does it mean to be working class? Does a sex worker from a middle-class background become working-class when she becomes a sex worker? The problem of categorisation of 'sex work' within models of 'blue collar' and 'white collar' is obvious.

And finally, sex workers, even when they are working-class, often found, and find, that languages of class and cultures of class exclude them. Working-class movements were usually not particularly keen on including prostitutes as part of their vision, and trade unionists tended to be very conservative in their views on prostitution – in the 1880s, most trade unionists used the existence of prostitution as an argument for a better breadwinner's wage, as an example of the harms of the man of the house not being paid enough.

Socialists understood that prostitution was part of a spectrum of exploited work. Prostitution, as Marx put it, 'is only a *specific* expression of the *general* prostitution of the *labourer*'.²⁷ But even most socialist feminists saw prostitution as an indictment of women's sweated and exploited labour in legal sectors, and rarely thought about prostitution itself as work or the women who did it as workers who could be organised. On the whole, working-class politicians and advocates have remained uncomfortable discussing the prostitution of their wives and daughters; and sex workers themselves have rarely found a place even in the most radical socialist circles – until very recently.

One last complication: since around 1880, the labour movement, much like everyone else, increasingly came to refer to prostitution as 'white slavery' and to conceive of prostitution as a form of 'slavery', not 'work'. As Gunther Peck has shown, in this period, 'white slavery' moved from being a term used by trade unionists and socialists – especially in the antebellum US – to articulate the 'wage slavery' of white male workers, to being a term that was 'feminised' and used almost exclusively as a euphemism, or an explanatory model, for prostitution.²⁸ This unhelpful conversation about 'slavery vs. work' has continued to dichotomise debates about sexual labour rights up into the present day.

Today we have many sex workers' rights/sex work labour organisations. But there's a tension inherent in these campaigns, which call for 'decriminalisation' of a form of 'work' that has been unjustly criminalised (a call with which I could not agree more). These campaigns often do not account for the fact that within the international and national legal frameworks that have developed over the past 100-odd years, 'work' is something that is regulated and legal, not just decriminalised; it's also, increasingly in our neoliberal internationalist age, something that needs to be 'dignified'. This loops back to my earlier point about casual feminised labour in all its forms being difficult for the labour movement, and for international and national labour organisations, to reckon with: should it be criminalised or decriminalised? Is it part of a wider spectrum of unpaid labour (i.e. housework), or part of a large category of fundamentally undignified work that we will constantly deny capitalism's need of? Or is it an 'ordinary' form of work that should be regulated or deregulated? I think sex work is destined to fall between these poles for a long time to come.

Sex work troubles a lot of categories we often take for granted. It shows us how difficult it has been – and how difficult it is today – to agree on who makes up the ‘working class’, who gets to say who’s in and who’s out, and what ‘work’ even is. The way sex workers have been treated and conceptualised within labour movements historically also prompts us to reflect on the ways those movements have, of course, often been inflected deeply by gender and shaped by restrictive notions of sexual respectability.

George Stevenson: This is clearly an important point to recognise. Historians of radical, progressive movements are always concerned about the universality of the stories we’re telling. The whole approach of ‘history from below’ is predicated on the recognition that some people are missing from our stories – in other words, that some groups are ‘hidden’ from history; and definitions of the working class are equally prone to such omissions. The British working class and its movements have exhibited racism, sexism and homophobia as frequently as intersectional solidarity. Whether it was dismissing women workers’ fights for equal pay or the shameful racism around strikes like that at Imperial Typewriters, the class formations of Britain’s workers do not have a spotless record.²⁹ As Julia outlined, this is especially true when there is disagreement about whether or not something is ‘work’ at all.

This is perhaps one reason why labour historians and left-wing politicians today have been wary of telling simple, heroic stories about the past, of offering a straightforward counter-hegemonic version of the British working class. I would say, though, that we should be wary of allowing our understandable reluctance to develop into political paralysis.

The Conservative Party has demonstrated that fealty to ‘truth’, balance or nuance is hardly an essential feature of successful contemporary political discourse. The recent report on racial inequalities in Britain was an excellent case in point: it managed to conclude that structural racism does not exist *and* that it is actually white working-class boys who are discriminated against in Britain.³⁰ The report was swiftly disparaged and deconstructed, but it demonstrated the Conservative Party’s increasing willingness to incorporate discourses of class into its ideological project. The Conservative Party is comfortable constructing a working class that is amenable to its ideas, even if this requires creating an artificial version of the British working class that leaves anyone but white manual workers invisible and that also conceals the progressive history of those same white, male manual workers.

As a result, we are left fighting on the territory determined by our opponents. We critique and challenge. Perhaps we use a funding bid or an article to ‘problematise’ some or other reactionary narrative but we’re forever stuck in this defensive posture. However, I think these tools of critique do provide the possibility of a resolution.

Our constructions of class can never be as simple as conservative discourses, but we *can* offer a coherent counter-narrative of class and class politics in Britain that provides a way out of our paralysis. We may know that the British working class has been racist, sexist and homophobic. We may know that its political institutions have been exclusionary and in many cases continue to be so. But we also know that the British working class has been anti-racist, confronted patriarchy and stood in solidarity with LGBT movements. Most importantly, in this complexity, we know that there is *agency*. We need not deploy these usable pasts to replace conservative fictions with myths of our own. What makes these pasts ‘usable’ politically is that they show the working class as a historical agent.

Whether it’s factory work, housework or sex work, the working class is always, to paraphrase Thompson, present at its own formation, again and again, and is different every time. By framing class as *action*, we can offer a historically nuanced but powerful antidote to the *reactionary*, unchanging working class of the right’s imaginary. Telling alternative stories of the working class through this lens allows us to maintain our professional and intellectual integrity while reframing the terms of the debate.

Unfortunately, as I noted above, for the British Labour Party to use working-class histories in this way would require a sharp turn away from the liberal moralism that dominated even the left’s brief control of the party. Indeed, it is the predominance of moral registers in the party that may explain why Corbyn could condemn austerity but not speak of the working class, why Labour MPs from the left and right of the party conceptualise sex work through morality rather than class, or why the party will now focus on flags and patriotism to win back working-class voters. This disconnection from class *politics* leaves the party with very little means of discussing class outside of conservative frames.

Aditya Sarkar: I agree with George that we need to examine what the right is doing. In fact, this is the second key way, I’d suggest, that we need to confront and resist the right-wing logic of the ‘white working class’: by analysing the methods through which right-wing politics in the UK, at different moments of its formation, has sought to elicit working-class support. This would involve, most importantly, an engagement with the various theoretical debates about right-wing populism that have become prominent of late, but also have an older global genealogy (notably in the Latin American and South Asian contexts, but also elsewhere). It may, for instance, involve revisiting Stuart Hall’s explanations of ‘authoritarian populism’ in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and charting the continuities as well as the breaks between what Hall described and what we confront today.³¹ It may involve fresh studies of the very long history of specifically working-class forms of Toryism, patriotism and racism. It will also have to involve studies of the ways in which

contemporary racism is sometimes *unmoored* from the long history of empire, as David Edgerton has argued.³² As for the figurations of class in our immediate present, we might want to consider how rust-belt melancholia, both as a politically-charged invocation of lost and dying working classes and as a culturally embedded structure of feeling, has seemingly passed so decisively from the left to the right of the political spectrum.

Part of this project of understanding the appeal of the right must be taking the 'white working class', the 'red wall', the 'left behind', and other figures of right-wing populist discourse as the object of analysis, and subjecting them to a focused genealogical scrutiny. To my mind, this would require looking closely at the origins of the present figuration of the 'white working class' in the rhetorical repertoire of the British far right since at least the 1970s, in street-based movements like the NF and later the EDL, and in neo-Nazi political formations like the BNP.

It would also, perhaps even more importantly, require an examination of precisely how these rhetorical figures, once mostly the property of the far right, are now upheld across an astonishingly diverse political spectrum. To put it baldly: there is no difference between the way in which BBC reports talk of the working class in Britain and the way the far right does. Whether the prefix 'white' is used or not, whether the qualifier 'English' is used or not, race and nation, along with a cornucopia of regressive social attitudes, have become the central identifiers of 'working-classness' in the most widespread expressions of national discourse.

And even more disturbingly, very large segments – I'd say even the dominant sections – of the British left do the same thing, or at least succumb to it without much of a fight. Labour's policy since 2016, for instance, has been predicated on not 'offending' 'red wall' voters, not calling clearly racist ideas and attitudes what they are, genuflecting to the figure of the 'people' who expressed their 'will' in a toxic and xenophobic referendum five years ago, and chiding 'Remoaner' critics for being 'condescending' about the 'legitimate concerns' of the 'left-behind'. George suggested earlier that Labour has ceded the discursive territory of class to the right, and I would go even further: Labour has long capitulated to and reinforced right-wing understandings of the working class.

It's common on the left today to get very angry about Keir Starmer's betrayals of the anti-racist cause, and of course we should be angry. But it's dishonest – if also rather convenient – to forget that Labour's most fatal and consequential concession to right-wing populism took place under Corbyn's leadership. The decision to accept the abolition of freedom of movement within the EU cast a shadow Corbynism was never able to outrun. I'd go so far as to say that there isn't a single crisis on the left today that cannot be traced back to that abject surrender. It was a crucial moment in the 'mainstreaming' of an aggressively racialised redefinition of class in the UK.

Both as labour historians and as leftists, it is necessary to chart and explain the processes through which this redefinition has taken place, and how it has come to span the country's political space from right to left.

And there is a way of doing this that stresses the continuities of racism, imperialism, xenophobia and social conservatism in Britain. Many explanations of Brexit racism, for instance, point back to unjust immigration laws against people of colour, and to the ways in which empire and race have 'always', so to speak, coloured public consciousness in this country. So we end up with a historical narrative where, to put it figuratively, Edward Colston, Cecil Rhodes, Winston Churchill and Boris Johnson become part of a single, continuous pageant of racism and imperialism, where 'colonialism never really ended', and so on.

Now obviously there are long-term continuities that need to be unearthed in order to explain the seemingly unstoppable shift to the right today. But to leave the matter there is dangerous. I fear a model of explanation in which all cows are black, where one ends up with the thought that 'it's always been this way', or – to quote a common figure of activist speech – 'I can't believe that this is still happening today in 2022'. Both these thoughts end up figuring the struggle between social progress and right reaction as the struggle between the old or residual on the one hand, and the new and forward-looking on the other. Today, it seems to me that this is a mode of thinking which does not help us very much, because there is something very distinctively new in the current configuration of nationalist and racist themes in British culture, and in their relationship to long-term historical trends. Let me illustrate this.

Consider two themes which figure in the 'common sense' of the contemporary radical left. One is the theme of how capitalism has always required raced, gendered and national divisions to perpetuate itself, and how racism, xenophobia and misogyny are therefore functional for the reproduction of capitalist society. The other is the theme of how formal concessions to equality in public life – such as prohibitions on racist hate speech, formally inclusive modes of speech and discourse, nods to gender and ethnic diversity, etc – have functioned as liberal 'masks' behind which capitalist exploitation goes on unabated and even intensified. We have all encountered such arguments; I dare say at one point or another we have also *made* these arguments.

Now these claims at one level are quite true. Of course capitalism has historically been intertwined at a quite organic level with racial and sexual divisions of labour, and with the ideological systems which have sustained these. Equally, it is obvious that many of the commitments to formal racial or sexual equality within advanced capitalist societies – commitments which became installed in public policy in the 1990s and 2000s – were achieved within very strict limits, and installed within

public life only to the degree that they were compatible with the capitalist organisation of social life. But do either of these insights, valid on their own terms, help us think through our present post-Brexit predicament?

How, for instance, do we make sense of Boris Johnson's airy 'fuck business' comment? How do we make sense of British Conservatism's unflinching, and historically unprecedented, commitment to a path which makes structural economic decline not only likely but inevitable, and is in no sense in the interests of British capital as a whole (as distinct from specific fractions of capital)? How do we make sense of the readiness with which British industry and services have been sacrificed at the altar of a right-wing reaction against the EU? How do we make sense of the extraordinary mess that is the UK government's Covid policy, and its embrace of strange libertarian resentments of masks, social distancing, and anti-vaxxer moods? How do we make sense of a policy that sacrifices social and economic stability, and the future of British capitalism itself, to the short-term interests of the aviation and hospitality sectors? Last but certainly not least, how do we make sense of the fact that the Conservative and Unionist Party pushed for the hardest possible Brexit, in a way that makes the breakup of the United Kingdom all but inevitable?

Absolutely none of this makes any sense in terms of an 'interests of capital' line of reasoning. I think the conclusion is unavoidable: currently, the need to ride the tiger of right-wing populism outweighs every other consideration for the ruling party, including the future of British capitalism itself. So we are looking at an entanglement of class domination, racial supremacism and social conservatism all right – but the logic of this is not the same as the logic which makes them 'functional' for capitalism. It is the opposite.

Equally, the left's tradition – in large part justified – of complaining about the hypocrisies of liberals, and diagnosing their role as rationalisers of capitalist domination, is I think entirely irrelevant to any sort of critical left thinking about the present. In stark contrast to the dominant drift of most modern British history, the new form of authoritarian capitalism which is dominant both in Britain and globally has liberalism itself, in all its forms, in its cross-hairs. The combination of neoliberal capitalism and superficial – if nonetheless important – concessions to social liberalism has been almost entirely snapped by the current regime.

Social liberalism itself is the enemy which the right seeks to erase, and the current attacks on left-wing and antiracist teaching and scholarship, for instance, are part of a general war on liberalism which defines contemporary right-wing politics. For those of us who believe we stand for something to the left of liberalism, this poses a genuine intellectual and political question. Our enemy, in the foreseeable future, is no longer going to be the 'hypocritical centrist', as it tended to be in the 1990s and

2000s. It is, rather, going to be the *alternative* to that hypocritical centrism: we imagined that the alternative would come from the left, but it came from the right instead. From *Jacobin* to *Tribune*, much of the discourse of today's left consists of an evasion or mystification of this simple, glaring fact.

Unpalatable as this thought may be to much of the left, I'd suggest that, today, all attacks on liberalism and 'centrism' serve solely as fodder for the right. Yet the left is caught in a tradition – dominant for the last three decades at least – where the liberal centre, rather than the right, has been the central target of animosity. This made sense in the 2000s. It is entirely counter-productive today, and only a left that is able to break decisively with this tendency will be able to avoid being drawn into the populist spider-web spun by the right. In a country moving rightwards, left-wing populism will never be able to confront right-wing populism, and will end up surrendering to it – as the politics of 'Lexit' makes amply clear.

Julia Laite: Aditya suggests that the Labour Party has capitulated to the right's understanding of what it means to be working class. I think this is right, and there's another point to draw out here: that is, the idea of the 'white working class' is mobilised by the Conservatives as part of a form of *identity politics*, rather than within a politics of class, labour and economics. And Labour is currently going along with this.

Again, in fact, the issue of sex work can help us think through the dangers of seeing issues of class and labour as simply issues of identity and identity politics. I'm really struck by how sex workers' organisations are generally considered a 'thing apart' from other forms of working-class politics, despite their constant reiteration of the point that sex work is work, and their invocation of their own previous working poverty to explain why they do it. Instead of being part of a wider labour politics, sex work and sex workers' organisations are considered as a form of 'identity politics'. In part this is because some sex workers claim the right to speak through identity politics rather than through labour politics, but it's also in part because of the way that the labour movement refuses, on the whole, to engage.

Most strikingly of all, the Labour Party won't touch prostitution with a ten-foot-pole, except as a fringe issue that they let some of their feminist members (often called 'SWERFS' or, sex work exclusionary radical feminists) make hay with. For the Labour Party (despite the efforts of sex workers who are members and passionately campaigning on this issue), prostitution is an issue of gendered oppression, not working-class oppression, and the party seems intent on continuing to think about sex work in this binary way. In fact, this is part of a much wider, international problem, in that the 1949 UN protocol effectively defined prostitution as 'not work', declaring it 'incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person'. This puts sex work entirely outside the parameters of debates about rights, safety and remuneration at work. And this exclusion of sex work from those debates contrib-

utes directly to the economic precarity and physical danger that many of those working in the industry face today.

The point I want to make here is that when we allow the right to frame the issue of sex work as one of identity politics – or fail to contest such a framing – we obscure a major part of the problems that sex workers face. To put it bluntly, sex workers don't just face the issue that they're oppressed by their gender, they also, in the main, face the problem that they're economically precarious or downright poor. When we fail to contest the right's framing we miss the need to think intersectionally about the sources of oppression.

Laura Schwartz: Aditya mentioned the right-wing attacks on left-wing and antiracist teaching and scholarship, and this is also an area I think we need to be thinking about and pushing back on. The culture wars are turning into the history wars and they're getting nasty. At present the right is primarily targeting historians working on the history of the British Empire and slavery, though in September 2020 the Department for Education also prohibited schools from using resources produced by organisations which 'publicly stated [a] desire to abolish or overthrow ... capitalism'.³³ Labour historians working in universities should not be complacent, though we might be heartened by noting that such moves towards censorship also suggest that the histories we write have the power to unsettle and might have some impact on the world beyond the ivory tower.

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Notes

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