

Editorial

Who are ‘the many’?

One of the key problems for the left today is to find a better story about who we are as a country. And this is deeply entwined with understandings of class, as Gary Younge illustrated in a discussion earlier this year on how we imagine ‘us’ and ‘them’. His imagined Leave response to the Remain argument that Brexit could mean the closure of their local factory was: ‘It’s not my factory and “they’ve” been closing factories around here for years. But it is my country and I don’t want “them” messing with it.’ As he argues, in this story ‘they’ is a moving target: ‘It could be immigrants, it could be Brussels, it could be foreign companies. The only thing “we” know for sure is it’s not “us”.’¹

We would add to this argument the point that not only does the left need a better way of thinking about the national ‘we’, we also need a better sense of who ‘we, the left’ is: how do we define our constituencies, our parties and our allies, and the relationships between them? And how do these link these into the way we imagine the country as a whole? These questions are intimately connected, and any answers we come up with are also likely to be connected.

The emergence of populist politics in the UK and elsewhere highlights these issues. There has been much discussion about the definition of populism, but there is a general consensus around its basis in an opposition of the ‘people’ to ‘the elites’.² This immediately raises questions about who the ‘the people’ or ‘the elites’ might be: who these definitions include or exclude, and what ideologies and lived experience they might draw on to gain traction. Labour’s own version of this - ‘the many not the few’ - has no overtones about race or nation, but its very vagueness allows for multiple ways of imagining who the ‘many’ are. Given that the task of the party is to construct an alliance capable of winning an election, its choice of who among the many it will construct its alliance around is absolutely central.

David Featherstone and Lazaros Karaliotas, in their article on populism in this issue, argue that in the British context an appeal to ‘the people’ always means paying attention to the ‘sedimented racist nationalist populism that has been a feature of the

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English social formation for a number of decades' (citing Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever). But this does not in any way mean pointing a finger at the working class, as such attitudes exist across all levels of society (one need only consider Boris Johnson's statements as evidence of racist attitudes amongst the privileged). As Roshi Naidoo argued in her article after the referendum vote in autumn 2016, the national story is largely produced in the domains 'where the enlightened middle and upper classes hold power (the media, arts and heritage, education, local and national politics, and other spheres where national culture is built and nurtured)'.³ If we are to argue for a left populism in Britain, we need to be clearer on interconnections of race, class and nation.

As Featherstone and Karaliotas also note, populists tend to look to the nation-state as a framework for constructing the people, and this focus on the national arena often involves an overlooking of other spaces of power and politics, including the local and the international. This then leads to an acceptance of what they call a 'narrowly nationed narrative of the crisis'. They argue that this narrow view can be seen in Lexit positions in the UK, in which national politics are seen as the immediate answer to the problems of the European Union and globalisation in general. Reminding us that the nation is not the only geographical imaginary through which populism can be articulated, they call for a critical engagement with left populism, particularly in relation to the ways in which it constructs 'the people'.

Who is the working class?

'Us' and 'them', 'the people' versus 'the elite', the 'many not the few' - these are all ways of constructing a political antagonism that alludes to, but does not directly invoke, the question of class. The complexities of class are difficult for Labour, given that it was founded as the party for workers, and its support base for a long time rested on the large sections of the population who unproblematically identified themselves as working-class and therefore as its natural constituency. As this constituency has crumbled as a basis for support, the party has had to find new ways of defining itself. We would argue that a better understanding of class - and class alliances - would help Labour put together a new constituency.

Most on the left have a basic idea that class is important, but we tend to think about it on a number of different levels, not all of which help us think about political

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strategy. Stuart Hall identified this in his interrogation of David Harvey's account of Marxism in Isaac Julien's film *Capital*.⁴ Hall's argument is that the general laws of Marx's theory of capital operate at such a level, that, as Marx himself said, you need to add in more and more levels of determination in order to have an understanding of concrete instances of its power. This means that the 'laws' tell us very little about how we experience class in a specific moment. David Harvey's response is to stick with the idea that it is easy to recognise who the proletariat are, but he does not attempt to address Hall's point that if 99 per cent of us are the proletariat in Marx's terms, how can that be useful to us in understanding contemporary politics. What does it mean to say that class is the agency of change at any level beyond the abstract?⁵

One way out of this dilemma is to rely on common sense - of course we already know what the working class is - indeed that is the essence of Harvey's response to Hall. But we know that in fact the composition of the working class has changed dramatically since the halcyon days of mass socialist parties. It was an unwillingness to recognise all the changes that had taken place in the old familiar working class that was at the root of all the hostility directed towards Eric Hobsbawm's article 'The forward march of labour halted', way back in 1978 - written just before Thatcher came to power.⁶ People whose political and personal identity was bound up in those old collectivities found the changes unbearable, and directed their ire at the messenger.

But it is important to try to understand these changes because we cannot rely on common sense ideas about who constitutes the working class. Too often traditional views of class failed to notice the kinds of issues Hall raised in his discussion with Harvey - in particular the relationship to class of race and gender.⁷ And a nostalgic view of class (as white, male, industrial labour) is something that is often mobilised within right populist politics. It is important that any left populism steers clear of these lazy analyses because they exclude large numbers of people from the body politic. We need to analyse the workings of capital, but we also need to recognise its contemporary manifestations - and the way it is also racialised and gendered.

A number of more recent efforts have been made to understand changing forms of capital and class. For example, work by the EuroMayDay movement of the early Noughties, as well as books by Guy Standing and Mike Savage et al, have conceptualised the figure of the precariat in order to draw attention to the situation

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of low-paid service industry work: is an Uber driver, a care worker or a coffee shop worker ‘working class’?⁸ Service work in fact accounts for 83 per cent of the UK workforce, according to 2018 figures.⁹ So those older conceptions of class are not by any means the dominant form of present-day working life. But they linger on in people’s imaginations, and within the post-Brexit, populist context, these ideas have underpinned the notion of a homogeneous working-class culture that is being undermined by globalisation - understood as a process whereby mobile workers have destroyed indigenous culture, rather than one in which mobile wealth has destroyed the material bases that once sustained its (never homogeneous) culture. And it is this old image of class that has been weaponised as a way of dismissing and ignoring the views and experiences of large sections of contemporary society, and excluding them from the way the ‘people’ is imagined.

It is important to acknowledge the widespread effects of the decades of dislocation, dysfunction and undermining of trust that are a legacy of neoliberalism, and the role played by this in the Brexit vote. But this is no excuse for the reductive conceptions of class that underpin claims that the Leave vote was first and foremost a working-class protest vote.¹⁰ One such claim is based on polling data that showed that 68 per cent of those holding university degrees voted to remain and 70 per cent of those with GCSE-level qualifications or less voted to leave.¹¹ Yet this is to ignore the correlation of education with age. Statistical evidence shows that age was a significant factor in the referendum, with 80 per cent of females aged 18-24 voting Remain, and 62-66 per cent of both men and women aged 65 and over voting Leave.¹² (Were all these young women middle-class?) The use of education as a proxy for class obscures this generational divide. In 1970, 8.4 per cent of the population attended university; as of 2017 this stood at 49 per cent.¹³ It cannot be assumed that everyone who attends university is middle-class or that they will automatically be guaranteed a middle-class job. They are just as likely to end up with zero-hour contracts and in other forms of precarious, exploitative employment; according to figures from the OECD, one in four graduates is overqualified for their job.¹⁴

We can see these nostalgic conceptions of class in the arguments that seem to see Leave voters and the working class as interchangeable. Emotive language such as the Labour ‘heartlands’ is frequently used: suggesting both the heart as the seat of feelings (rather than rational thought) and heartlands as a place of origin. And

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these arguments are also frequently guilt-laden: there is a sense that these voters are owed something and that their concerns must be listened to, even if heeding them involves undermining the rights of others, including EU citizens and immigrants in general. Perhaps this is based on a recognition of the damage done to working-class areas in the North and in Wales by New Labour policies as well as those of the Tories. But the answer to regional and class inequality is policies to promote regional and class equality, not to dream of a return to the days of pits and mills.

The 'nationed geographical imagination' referred to by Featherstone and Karaliotas also frames and limits debates on class in relation to migration and race: equality legislation and migrant workers are often seen as threats to the working class (imagined as in some sense indigenous). Public debates in the lead-up to the Brexit vote and in the period following have been dominated by the media construct of the 'white working class', which then became used interchangeably with the 'left behind' and in some cases the 'heartlands'. It is implied that one must be white and British to be working-class: migrants and ethnic minorities are assumed to be outside of class. The idea of a 'white working class' does ideological work by presenting immigration as a problem; by abstracting class from economic conditions in its separating of 'white' working-class people from 'black' and 'ethnic minority' working classes (and also white people of other nationalities); and by claiming that it is really white British people who bear the brunt of neoliberalism and austerity cuts, rather than working-class people of all ethnic backgrounds and nationalities.¹⁵ Indeed, the 'metropolitan' working class is sometimes even lumped in with the 'elites', given that populist constructions of the elite tend to include many people with neither wealth nor power, as the 'elites' vs 'the people' model becomes ever more abstracted from material conditions.

As Gurinder Bhambra has argued, despite its deployment of the language of class, and its proponents' newfound concern for economic conditions (which they accuse cosmopolitans of ignoring because of their focus on 'identity politics'), the figure of the 'white working class' is actually about a 'new identity politics of race where "whiteness" trumps class position'.¹⁶ And this is also a form of identity politics that ignores racism as a structural condition: yet, as she argues, race, just like class, 'has been fundamental to the configuration of the modern world'; and it remains integral to the 'configuration of socio-economic inequalities in the present' (p227). The figure of the 'white working class' obscures economic conditions and promotes

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division between working-class people; and it can also be seen a form of race talk, in that it acts to condone racism and xenophobia, in as much as they are seen as arising from 'legitimate concerns about immigration'.

It is important that the Labour Party does not default to old and outdated ideas about class, or the more recent language of class as white identity politics, when it decides which constituencies to foreground in the alliance of the many. Instead it needs to get to grips with contemporary forms of capital accumulation and think about how these are constructing new relationships to production and distribution, and how it can best construct alliances based on changing relationships to class. It is unhelpful to allow unthinking assumptions about the composition of the working class to shape the way we view either the left or the country. If we cannot imagine the multicultural of the working class, we will not be able to imagine the people in all its diversity.

These issues have been thrown into sharp relief by struggles within the Labour Party in relation to its 'constructive ambiguity' on Brexit.¹⁷ Differences about Brexit reveal deeper fault-lines around the identity and constituencies of the Labour Party and the wider left. Labour needs to construct a popular majority that can bring together progressive people from the middle and working classes, in a coalition that is based on a commitment to equality and diversity, and a modern sense of nation. This will involve strategic compromises. Can we imagine a 'we' that is inclusive enough to encompass a plurality of perspectives and experiences? How do we include those who may not be active but might nonetheless share our principles? And is it possible to imagine such a wider constituency without repeating the problems of Blairism's 'big tent' - or the disillusion engendered by his techniques of triangulation? To try to get a better handle on this we need a sense of inclusion and alliance that is informed by an understanding of what is involved in constructing a popular left - and we do not mean by this trying to face two ways on Brexit, for fear of alienating Leave voters - which seems to us simply a different version of triangulation.¹⁸

The importance of theory

Campaigns for widening access to education have long been central to the history of the labour and socialist movement, and Sharon Clancy, in her article in this

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issue, explores the long and rich history of working-class education. She believes, with Raymond Williams, that democratising education is the key to democratising society. However, as we have seen, the reductive logic that now drives populist debates on Brexit is apparently based on the idea that one cannot attend university and be working-class (and conversely, the less education someone has, the more authentically working-class they are). It is a truism that universities have never fared well in right populist environments: as seen, for example, in the closure of the Central European University in Hungary, the imprisonment of Academics for Peace in Turkey, paranoia around free speech on campus, or Trump's statement about loving the poorly educated. However, it appears that, unfortunately, not all on the left are free from such assumptions.

It is undoubtedly true that there is a legitimate critique to be made of the hierarchical and exclusive environment of many universities, and the ways in which universities entrench socio-economic hierarchies. And it is also true that power often operates through people's claims to superior knowledge, including within the left. There is a palpable sense of the injustices generated by educational inequality, and the power bestowed on those regarded as educated, in this issue's discussion of political education. But, as Farzana Khan argues in her contribution, the privilege of education won by some should be seen as a resource towards the collective liberation of us all (though, as she also notes, we also all need the ability to stand back and let others occupy spaces of leadership). It is to the left's detriment if it collapses its critique of educational inequality into an outright rejection of higher education, or of the critical thinking that can help us understand contemporary politics. We believe that critical understanding is crucial to action. Not least, theory assists in the challenging of common-sense assumptions of the kind we have been briefly outlining here, and offers tools to interpret personal experiences and situate them into wider social conditions - this is one of our aims for *Soundings*.

We also believe that a rejection of theory has the effect of fixing working-class people into their allotted position in hierarchies of knowledge, and accepting their role as objects of knowledge production but never as knowledge producers. The fact that debates around class and education have become so reductive in some of the debates on Brexit, including on the left, is symptomatic of a cultural amnesia about the contribution of the working-class traditions that fought for education - and does not assist in current battles to protect higher education, including adult education,

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from the siege it is currently undergoing.

This is not to say that critical thinking is solely the preserve of journals such as ours. Our aim for *Soundings* is reasonably specific: to work with some of the ideas that we have inherited from a specific intellectual legacy - broadly speaking that of the first New Left, and figures such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall - but also to make extensive use of the cultural and theoretical space their work (and that of others) has enabled, which has allowed subsequent generations to explore areas such as race, gender and sexuality as a way of understanding the complex and intersectional nature of power, including cultural power. Critical thinking that embraces these complexities is a necessity if we are to find ways to forge alliances to meet the difficult challenges we are currently facing.

Sally Davison and Kirsten Forkert

Notes

1. See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/01/poorer-brexiteers-worse-off-working-class-leavers>.
2. For more on this definition see the article by David Featherstone and Lazaros Karaliotas in this issue.
3. Roshi Naidoo, 'Right back where we started from', in 'After Brexit' roundtable, *Soundings* 64, autumn 2016: <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/64/after-brexit>.
4. A transcription of some of this discussion is available in Isaac Julien, *Playtime and Capital*: <https://muac.unam.mx/exposicion/isaac-julien?lang=en>, pp88-91.
5. Mike Rustin writes about agency in this issue.
6. Eric Hobsbawm, 'The forward march of labour halted', *Marxism Today*, September 1978, available free to view at http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/mt/index_frame.htm.
7. Harvey recognises that capitalist power is racialised and gendered in his analysis. It is on the question of what this means for agency that Hall is querying him.
8. Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Bloomsbury 2011; Mike Savage et al, 'A new model of social class? Findings from the Great British Class Survey', *Sociology* 47 (2), 2013.
9. UK Parliament, 'Service industries: Key economic indicators', *House of Commons Library*, 11 June 2019: <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN02786>.
10. Danny Dorling challenged this assertion in 'The NHS and the elderly middle class', his contribution to the roundtable cited above: <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/64/after-brexit>. He points out that most people who voted Leave lived in

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the South of England, and that only 24 per cent of Leave voters belonged to the lowest social classes (D and E).

11. Fact Check: Did Britain's better educated vote to remain? *The Week*, 1 November 2017: <https://www.theweek.co.uk/89378/fact-check-did-uk-s-better-educated-vote-remain>.

12. Statista, 'Distribution of EU Referendum votes in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2016, by age group and gender': <https://www.statista.com/statistics/567922/distribution-of-eu-referendum-votes-by-age-and-gender-uk/>.

13. Paul Bolton, 'Education: Historical statistics', House of Commons Library, 27 November 2012: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/22771/1/SN04252.pdf>.

14. OECD, 'Education at a glance 2018: OECD Indicators', OECD, 11 September 2018: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education-at-a-glance-2018_5j8qqdt51c23.pdf?itemId=%2Fcontent%2Fpublication%2Fag-2018-en&mimeType=pdf.

15. This argument is based on Naidoo's 'Right back where we started from'.

16. Gurminder Bhambra, 'Brexit, Trump, and "methodological whiteness": On the misrecognition of race and class', *British Journal of Sociology* 68 (S1), p219.

17. Others elsewhere have pointed out that the Labour leadership's refusal to back a second referendum on EU membership sits at odds with the principles of the Corbyn project about listening and responding to the views of membership, so we don't intend to repeat these discussions here.

18. Mary Kaldor writes about Brexit and democracy in this issue.