

Building the ‘Boris’ bloc: angry politics in turbulent times

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Understanding the multiple forces shaping the ‘Johnson bloc’ may enable a strategic focus on its potential lines of fracture and failure.

The resounding victory of ‘Boris’ Johnson’s Conservative Party in December 2019 has already had shattering consequences: causing upheaval in political parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats, the Brexit Party Ltd), reigniting the stalled negotiations with the European Union and deepening fractures in the unity of the United Kingdom. It is a result whose effects are likely to be felt over a longer span, reconfiguring the British polity, economy and state. Much of the commentary in the days after the election has focused on what might be called immediate causes: was it Brexit or Corbyn that drove the catastrophic collapse of the Labour vote? Or was it all about the working class?

Such questions are certainly important, since they will - or should - inform a longer-term strategy for the future. But we also need to ask how to reconcile the immediate causes with the longer-running shifts and fracturings that have unsettled ways of life, livelihoods, identifications and affiliations; and make an effort to understand the complex interplay of processes that has produced this moment. One difficulty in such moments is how to think - analytically and politically - about the different timescales, the different temporalities and forces, that are in play in bringing the moment to life. Each temporality brings with it sets of unfinished

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contradictions, crises and conflicts, and they combine in complicated ways to give shape to the present. This article is my attempt at exploring some of these puzzles by starting to disentangle some of these different processes and their timescales so that we can trace their complex interplay. While I don't doubt the emotional satisfaction of being able to name a single cause for the Johnson victory, I don't think it is helpful analytically or politically. Both Brexit and Jeremy Corbyn's leadership were regularly referenced in the way people talked about and justified their voting choices, but the longer histories of the Brexit vote, the trajectory of the Labour Party (at least since the first Thatcher victory of 1979) and the long undermining of the foundations of the 'Red Wall' also demand some attention.

A final introductory point: at election times, we are particularly prone to obsess about the national focus, pushing wider framings (global and transnational dynamics) into the background. But keeping these framings visible is especially important given that the UK forms part of an international wave of nationalist-authoritarian-populist politics, and as the new government plots a course to make the UK 'open for business'.

The public mood: feeling like a Conservative

The 2019 Conservative campaign effectively captured a series of public moods, not least in the former Labour-held 'strongholds' of the Midlands and North of England. Their decision to campaign as the 'People's Champion' against a series of enemies (the EU, the metropolitan-liberal elite, an out of touch Parliament and more) who were thwarting the 'People's Will' was an obvious political choice and a profoundly effective one. It kept alive, and even revitalised, core sentiments and antagonisms from the 2016 Referendum. It reminded people that 'politicians couldn't be trusted' (except, of course, the untrustworthiest of them all ...). It affirmed the People's right to decide and invoked their fury and frustration that - after the only time they had apparently 'won' something - politics and politicians had once again let them down. This sense of anger has deep roots in the UK but is also a very strong thread connecting the British experience to many others elsewhere that form a web of 'angry politics' around the globe.¹ The original Leave vote was itself animated by various emotional dispositions - anger, loss, revenge and more.² But the Conservative vote in 2019 was also enabled by other sentiments, not least a pervasive sense of

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‘Brexit fatigue’: the feeling of endless recurrence featuring Brexit as Groundhog Day.

This feeling of frustration has a profound basis in the populist character of the original Vote Leave campaign, which promised *immediate* liberation from the shackles that bound Britain to the EU. However, the return to the political-governmental time of negotiation, deal-making and debate disrupted that fantastic projection of Brexit’s immediacy, and engendered fury and frustration at the ‘blockers’. But Brexit fatigue covers a diversity of experiences - from the frustrated anger of Leave voters to the sense of being ground down that came to affect many Remain voters (partly rooted in the political impasse, partly in the continuing rancorousness of political culture). Over the last year, I had many conversations with Remain voters who ‘just wanted it to be over’, even allowing for the continuing uncertainty of what ‘it’ might be and growing anxieties about what a Johnson ‘deal’ would mean.

Finally, there was a mood of scepticism about the Labour Party’s electoral promises. The ‘looking both ways’ position on Brexit proved a stumbling block, and while the substantial manifesto for public investment initially appeared as an attractive basis for Labour campaigning, it was bedevilled by two problems. First, the party regularly added new promises to the manifesto commitments, a condition which was memorably described as ‘policy incontinence’ and which contributed to the second problem.³ Labour’s policy proposals were recurrently undercut by what might be described as popular ‘fiscal realism’: too many people did not believe that they could be funded or achieved in practice. This sense of fiscal realism arises from a variety of sources. There was certainly extensive Conservative myth-making about the likely cost of Labour’s proposals, alongside threats about how Labour would pay for them (notably about capital gains tax on house sales for homeowners). Such stories were carried by the Conservative press and circulated widely online. At the same time, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) review of party manifestoes was heavily critical of both Labour and Conservative spending plans (albeit the criticisms were unevenly reported), while little was made of the underlying information that Labour’s plans would barely take public spending back to its 2010, pre-austerity, levels. Their assessment fitted with the more popular understanding of ‘fiscal realism’ that has dominated discussions of public spending since the Thatcher years (and her famous comparison of national economic calculations to a ‘housewife’s purse’). Such neoliberal conceptions of public spending as always excessive were

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sustained during the New Labour years (even as they selectively increased public spending), and provided the foundations for the subsequent decade of austerity politics and policies, with their ruthless logic of 'balancing the books'.⁴ This fiscal realism is probably best understood as a sub-set of 'capitalist realism', and echoes that other Thatcherite claim - that 'there is no alternative'.⁵ In 2019 many voters thought the Labour Party's promises were simply 'unrealistic' and found apparent comfort in the lesser (and thinner) promises of the Conservatives to enrol more police, doctors and nurses, a paradox perfectly expressed in one *vox pop* interview - 'I'm very worried about the NHS. I am going to vote Conservative' (BBC *News at Six*, 11 December 2019).

These sentiments were regularly voiced during the campaign (and in the many post-election *vox pops*) and underpinned a public mood in which it apparently became possible to 'feel like a Conservative'. As the 'Red Wall' of Labour seats across the North and Midlands crumbled, it was striking how often these feelings were repeated as voters struggled to account for their choices. Knowing that they were voting against the weight of local and familial history ('my father would be turning in his grave if he knew I'd just voted Conservative'), people recurrently turned to these emotions - anger, frustration, fatigue, and fiscal realism - as a way of accounting for themselves. There was one other recurrent theme: that 'feeling like a Conservative' was a provisional and conditional experience. This was picked up (with impressive speed) by the Johnson team, so that by the time of his speech on returning to 10 Downing Street, he was talking about people 'lending him their vote' and their pencils 'hesitating' above the ballot paper. It was further reflected in his 'Northern Progress' around some of the new constituencies in the following days, and promises of new investment.

Here we can already see some of the different temporalities in play: the immediate moment of electoral calculation, the longer dynamic of fiscal realism, alongside folk memories of a century's political affiliations.

All about class?

One theme has dominated the post-election discussion: the fracturing of the ties between the Labour Party and the British/English working class. While this is certainly the headline news from the election, it tends to conceal, rather than

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address, deeper and longer-term questions about class and politics. To put it simply, there are several problems about how we now understand the 'working class' as an entity after decades of de-industrialisation, migration and the deepening precarity of both white-collar and manual jobs. Both the conventional categorisations of ABC1 and C2DE and an inherited Marxist understanding of an industrial proletariat feel ill-equipped to cope with the complex dynamics of contemporary class remaking. The multiplying forms of precarity link young workers on zero-hours contracts to contingently employed office workers, to those encouraged to imagine themselves as 'self-employed' (such as delivery drivers) and finally to those dependent on shrinking and ruthlessly regulated state benefits (pensions, universal credit and the rest). These precarious citizens are neither the 'traditional working class' nor the 'underclass' of the conservative imagination: they are the new working classes, in all their complex racialised and gendered forms. As Ash Sarkar has argued: 'The problem with reducing the actually existing working class to a homogeneous group of older white Brits with regional accents is that it's fundamentally misleading'.⁶ She went on to insist on the importance of understanding the dynamics of these emergent class formations and their precarious conditions of existence, with a particular warning against juxtaposing 'young people' to the 'working class', as if young people (as well as women, black and brown people) fall outside formations of class. This is not to deny that some *sections* of the working class broke the habits of a lifetime and voted Conservative, but they were sections shaped by long trajectories of de-industrialisation, de-socialisation and de-collectivisation, beginning in the mid-1970s.

It is important to underline these intersecting dynamics: although de-industrialisation is well understood, it has been accompanied by the decline of a range of social and political infrastructures (unions, local councils, public services such as health, housing and education). Some were deliberately dismantled (the GLC and the metropolitan boroughs such as the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire'), and some were undermined by privatisations, contracting out, and systematic underfunding. The industrial sectors of these most severely hit areas (most dramatically, mining, ship-building and steel) were the home of that 'traditional working class', and it is not surprising that the votes for Brexit in 2016 and the Conservatives in 2019 were dominated by older and whiter sections of this ex-industrial working class, alongside similarly 'traditional' sections of the middle classes, who had their own feelings of loss and vulnerability.

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Indeed, the remaking of the middle classes has been equally significant. In the second half of the twentieth century, the old petit-bourgeoisie, involved in petty commodity production or service provision, was overtaken by the 'new middle classes' created both in the service of capital (the professional and managerial strata) and in the enormous expansion of the state and public services in the second half of the twentieth century. These patterns have now shifted again, spurred - and blurred - by the spread of self-employment in a variety of forms, from the 'gig economy' through the expanding service sector to the creative industries, where more and more people are incited to think of themselves as 'entrepreneurial'. Together, these changes have disrupted the traditional assumption that the petit-bourgeoisie were an inherently conservative political force. Indeed, some of its newer strata (often from public-service and related settings) formed the core of the claim that the Labour Party has become a party of the middle class.

However, the way we think about class is also important. Classes - even in this more complex sense - are still only an abstraction: abstracted from their embodied forms and the way they are lived in the multiple social relationships of social formations. Within any given social formation, groups and individuals are formed at the intersection of different lines of force - certainly including those of class, but also of gender, racialisation, age, sexuality and more. These intersections generate different pressures and possibilities, not least different kinds of possible identification. Perhaps most importantly, they generate different potential mobilisations as political subjects and political forces, open to being mobilised by different projects and ideas. The people forged at these intersections come to understand and imagine themselves (their lives, their troubles, their attachments, their possible futures) in different registers, and by no means simply as classes. Indeed, 'people like us' can have many different points of reference. Sometimes 'we' may understand ourselves and act as women demanding equality, sometimes as angry white men defending lost privilege, as workers abandoned by international capital as another factory is closed, or as people of colour told to 'go back to where we came from'. Politics - understood as the mobilisation (and sometimes de-mobilisation) of different social forces - operates on this field of possibilities, offering points of identification, attachment and antagonism. The Conservative bloc brought together in December 2019 created points of attachment and affiliation that enabled people to 'feel like a Conservative', however conditionally.

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Here we encounter another longer dynamic of change: the trajectory of the Labour Party and its relationship to these shifting formations of class. The triumph of Thatcherism drove an increasingly fractured Labour Party from Callaghan (authoritarian Labourism), through Foot (left turn), to Kinnock (building the new socially liberal base) in the space of four years between 1979 and 1983. Its return to electoral success in 1997 inaugurated the New Labour years and their distinctive mix of increased public spending, social authoritarianism *and* social liberalism, combined with the continuing neoliberal dynamic of de-industrialisation and financialisation. This cocktail of liberalisms and authoritarianism contributed decisively to the sense of places and people being 'left behind', especially in the former industrial heartlands in all four UK countries (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). The New Labour years also drove the shift to a more metropolitan-cosmopolitan party culture, at the same time as thinning out its institutional and organisational foundations (accompanied by declining party membership).

As with many other processes, this trajectory is not uniquely British: Labourism's trials and tribulations are the local example of a much wider crisis of social democracy in the global North.⁷ The EU proved to be a double-edged sword for social democracy, promising a base from which to resist globalising neoliberalism in the name of a 'social market' while at the same time providing a conduit through which neoliberal logics could be institutionalised. As a consequence, the EU contributed to many of the dynamics of de-industrialisation while providing the adjustment funds intended to manage the resulting economic and social dislocations. As a result, many voters in the UK's post-industrial towns have had an ambivalent, if not actively hostile, relationship to the EU.

Nevertheless, the British version of this ongoing crisis of social democracy takes a distinctive form, not least in the Corbyn-led rebuilding of the Labour Party in time for the 2017 general election. Notwithstanding its growth in membership, the geographic, age and class fragmentation of the party's base in 2019 poses questions about how new relationships of connection, identification and mobilisation might be built. But that is not my object here. Rather it is to insist that the field of the political - the theatre of politics - cannot be grasped in reductive terms that do not pay attention to how people are mobilised as blocs or alliances when they come to vote.

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To think about this election as part of a longer political project of assembling a bloc we need to look beyond the obsession with the 'working class' and think more carefully about political subjects and their mobilisation.⁸ Certainly, the bloc assembled under Johnson's leadership has mobilised substantial elements of the working class and key strata of the middle classes - particularly the more socially and culturally 'traditional' middle classes of the suburbs and shires. Writing about Brexit, Allan Cochrane has suggested that the Leave alliance mobilised two different social forces: sections of the post-industrial urban working class and sections of the post-colonial middle classes of the Home Counties.⁹ Those groups felt different senses of loss, generating twin nostalgias whose desires might be fulfilled by the promise of 'taking back control'. In the UK (and more precisely in England), the new nationalist-authoritarian-populism has mainly been crafted in the political space formed by the Conservative Party and its outliers, notably UKIP, and more recently the Brexit Party. As I have argued elsewhere, the multiple senses of loss are powerful connectors in this formation: loss of industry, loss of a 'way of life' (often understood as connected to migration) and the loss of felt power and superiority, making angry white males one vital axis of this formation.¹⁰

However, other aspects of the bloc are more puzzling: its backers and supporters have rarely been drawn from the dominant bloc of finance capital (especially during the long drawn-out moment of Brexit), nor what remains of British manufacturing. Rather, these moves have attracted the support of a range of idiosyncratic capitalists - who often appear as the heroes of their own stories, such as Arron Banks, James Dyson, Tim Martin, James Ratcliffe and Anthony Bamford. In 2019, the Conservatives also had the backing of a number of transnational hedge funds - the most volatile section of finance capital.¹¹ David Edgerton has written of the dissolving relationship between the Conservative Party and 'British Business', pointing to the non-national character of capital and its shifting relationship to national politics:

The fact is that the capitalists who do support Brexit tend to be very loosely tied to the British economy ... But the real story is something much bigger. What is interesting is not so much the connections between capital and the Tory party but their increasing disconnection. Today much of the capital in Britain is not British and not linked to

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the Conservative party - where for most of the 20th century things looked very different.¹²

This is, of course, an effect of the transnationalisation of capital. In a wider sense, globalised capital now expects to act on governments, rather than through political parties (though it has not entirely given up such connections where it appears to be a wise investment). The vulnerability of governments to such de-localised forms of capital has been a key lever in the long dynamic of neoliberal globalisation, while at the same time being a key force in the growing discontent and disaffection that has underpinned the proliferation of ‘angry politics’. This is another long temporality whose British dynamics are dominated by the arrival of Thatcherism, and the combined processes of de-industrialisation and financialisation (and the resulting growth of London as a ‘World City’) that the 1979 election inaugurated.¹³

In short, like any successfully mobilised political bloc, the 2019 Conservative one is a complex set of cross-class alliances, knitting together sections and fractions of different classes, configured through dynamics of age, gender and racialised differences. However, blocs also need to be assembled and articulated. The politics of articulation requires a means of mediating the message and its audiences in ways that enable them to find themselves being spoken for. Stuart Hall called this the practice of ‘ventriloquism’ to indicate its carefully stage-managed qualities. In a passage that might have been written about Brexit or the 2019 election (but was in fact about the arrival of Thatcherism) he wrote: ‘The press - especially those three popular ventriloquist voices of the radical Right, the *Mail*, the *Sun* and the *Express* - have played here a quite pivotal role’.¹⁴ Both traditional and new media have been central to the crafting of appeals to sentiments of loss (in its several varieties), dislocation and abandonment. Indeed, pointing out the failures of politics and the state was carefully calculated, both in what it named and in what it avoided (the austerity-fuelled destruction of public services, the predatory style of footloose capital and the privatisation of public resources, for example).

Britain and beyond: transnational trajectories

One of the challenges of thinking about the proliferating instances of ‘angry politics’ involves balancing the recognition of common trends with attention to the different national variations in which combinations of nationalism, nativism,

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authoritarianism and populism take place. This process of variation owes something to straightforward contextual differences: what Stuart Hall named as 'authoritarian populism' always speaks the local language, drawing on distinctive histories and imaginaries of the People and their enemies. But it also reflects the ways in which authoritarianism and populism become articulated with other political and cultural formations, including local forms of nationalism, racism, misogyny and homophobia. There is a delicate balance to be struck between emphasising cross-national similarities and attending to difference and variation. A recent collection edited by Jeff Maskovsky and Sophie Bjork-James examines diverse forms of 'angry politics' while exploring some of the common conditions. In their introduction the editors observe that:

In calling this anthology 'Beyond Populism,' we do not mean to suggest that populist politics do not exist or that the populist right has not gained ground in many contexts. But to call populism a political trend is not as essential, in our view, as is placing it and other forms of angry politics in their broader contexts and in disaggregating angry politics, so that the complexity and plurality of its sources and its multiple political coordinates become legible. It is essential, in other words, to use conjunctural thinking to make sense of the angry politics that are in play across the globe.¹⁵

This asks us to think *between* the poles of methodological nationalism and methodological globalism. Drawing out shared underlying dynamics is crucial, including aspects of global crises which have exposed the 'national question' as a point of intensification and concentration of political problems. But such national questions necessarily appear in different forms, taking place in specific economic, political and cultural formations. Thus the drive to globalise neoliberalism has disrupted and dislocated different places in unique ways, even though they certainly have in common the proliferation of new precarities, vulnerabilities, antagonisms and angry politics.

In what other ways are these experiences connected? One critical force is clearly the flows of new forms of capital: the deepening of financialisation since the 1980s is the most visible form (especially in the global North), but elsewhere there has also been a rapacious intensification of extractive capital (from mineral extraction in Latin America through the still compulsive drive for oil to fracking in the Pennine and Weald

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basins in the UK), and this has gone on alongside the simultaneous intensification and relocation of manufacturing. Trotsky's idea of 'combined and uneven development' might now invite us to consider the profoundly connected processes that produce different effects in different places, both between and within countries. This points to a *relational* understanding of space and place: treating specific places as being formed as the node, the point of intersection, of different relationships.¹⁶ Thinking transnationally then involves tracing the relations, flows and forces that connect - and disconnect - places. We could think of Britain as relationally produced and relationally unstable in many ways, not least in the complicated relationships that have framed Britain in relation to three poles of attraction and antagonism: Empire, Europe and America (the US). This would make visible the long history of Britain as a colonial metropole and the relations and resources which helped to make Britain Great (not to mention the ways in which 'Britishness' remains profoundly racialised).¹⁷ It would point to the long and short histories of Britain's entanglements in Europe (not just the EU) and the complex ways in which Britain has been recurrently defined as not really 'of' Europe.¹⁸ Finally, it would highlight the long and profoundly ambivalent 'special relationship' with the US, mediated by shifting relations of economic, political and cultural power, right through to the current bromance of Johnson and Trump (not to mention Farage as a crucial lubricant).

Thinking relationally also implies paying attention to the shifting internal relationships of the places that make up the more or less United Kingdom. Here too, there are long histories (and long historical memories) as well as more recent shifts and instabilities. Uneven *regional* developments have seen the rise of the South East alongside the stalled development and decline of England's elsewhere. Meanwhile, Scotland - both as a place and an idea - has experienced an economic, social and cultural revival. Alongside the dynamics of uneven economic and social development, the New Labour years created a mosaic of constitutional devolutions from Westminster to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. These arrangements have now become more unstable, most evidently in Scotland but also in the conflicted and contradictory place of Northern Ireland in the Brexit process. Indeed, the Brexit manoeuvring has underlined just how much this unsettled unity has been both driven and dominated by an English conception of the Union and its significance.

There are, of course, other ways in which instances of angry politics are connected. They are linked by transnational networks (especially of the far right)

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through which strategies and tactics are explored and exchanged, both in person and digitally. Some of these networks are embedded in organisations that promote international learning (embodied in figures such as Steve Bannon and Lynton Crosby), providing conduits for exchange and innovation. Bannon's name is a reminder that this field of right-wing angry politics is also peopled by travelling 'experts' - such as Bannon himself and, in his very English way, Nigel Farage - who serve to encourage, enable and connect. Other types of conduits enable the flow of money to sustain these innovations, which might be thought of as the political version of 'disruptive technologies'. There are delicate points of intersection in such flows and relationships, where political opportunism, forms of angry politics and the ongoing crisis of the nation-state meet.¹⁹

One Nation Conservatism?

The new prime minister has made much of being a 'One Nation' Conservative, prompting the question of which nation this might be. The election campaign and its immediate aftermath were full of promises about new investments - in public services such as health, housing and education, in 'left behind' parts of the country, in the revived vision of the 'Northern Powerhouse' and much more. Two questions accompany these promises: to what extent were they merely a sales pitch? And to what extent will current and future public finances enable them to be delivered? It is not unknown for Conservative governments to use public spending as a way of managing economic and political advantage, but the room for tactical manoeuvre in this moment may prove to be limited. Alongside these uncertainties, other tendencies are more clearly visible.²⁰

With an undentable majority (and a more disciplined parliamentary Conservative Party), the new government can proceed with uncoupling the UK from the EU and declaring Britain 'open for business'. The final shape of the relationship with the EU will take time to resolve but the larger intentions of the current Conservative Free Trade revivalism are clear. International capital will be very welcome to the UK, and an intense period of cherry-picking of those parts of the economy not already owned by international capital will follow. Similarly, opening the borders to less-regulated imports can also be expected (whether or not this involves the totemic chlorinated chicken). Breaking from the EU is likely to be accompanied by a 'rebalancing of

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rights and responsibilities' in economic relations, particularly diminishing workers' rights and expanding the 'right of managers to manage'. And, despite campaign promises that the NHS 'is not for sale', it is likely that its potentially profitable aspects (pharmaceuticals, especially) will follow those parts that have already been privatised, subcontracted or contingently loaned out (including patient details to big data organisations). In contrast, neither the fortunes of 'national' capital nor the looming agricultural crisis seem to be factored into Conservative calculations (to say nothing of the fast deepening environmental catastrophe).

Second, the hyphenated nation-state will become the focus of different - and conflicting - pressures. Most obviously, the nature of the Conservative success adds decisive new strains to the already tenuously-united Kingdom. Scotland's decisive shift to the SNP will feed new constitutional demands for independence - making more visible the English hegemony over the formation of Britishness. Meanwhile, the systematic disregard and neglect of the contradictory position of Northern Ireland in the Brexit project (part of the UK and sharing a land mass with the EU; governed through intergovernmental and power-sharing arrangements) has, for the first time, delivered a majority of 'Nationalist' MPs in the North. Westminster's systematic failure to keep the Irish question in mind (and its attempts to magically resolve it through hand-waving about borders and checks that may or may not materialise in the Irish Sea) has made the possibility of a United Ireland a legitimate and imaginable topic of political debate again. Which nation emerges from these strains and tensions remains an open question, but the constitution of the United Kingdom will be a recurrent focus of political contention. Ideas of the nation are intimately connected to the dynamics of racialised formations in both policy and everyday life. The right's continuing insistence on framing the nation as white and identifying black and brown people as out of place will be carried on both in migration policy (and the policing of people who look like migrants) and in populist political discourse.

Despite the electoral promises, this is a government dominated by 'small state' Conservatives, with several members of the authors of *Britannia Unchained* group serving as government ministers.²¹ Their book argued familiar neoliberal claims: that Britain has a bloated state, is over-taxed and over-regulated, and its workers are idlers. Doubtless, encouraging 'enterprise' at both corporate and individual levels will be a theme returned to by the new Cabinet, while the shrinking of the state and public services will follow the downwards trajectory of the last decade. As in the

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Thatcher decade, exceptions may be made, particularly around issues of 'security' and 'law and order' needs, but it is hard to see any change in the anti-welfarism that was intimately woven into austerity during previous governments. The 'lean and mean' state is back on the agenda - if indeed it ever fell off it.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the Conservative manifesto promised to review the nature of British democracy and its institutions of government, given that they had created such frustrations for the May and Johnson administrations in their pursuit of Brexit. Page 48 of the manifesto promised that:

After Brexit we also need to look at the broader aspects of our constitution: the relationship between the Government, Parliament and the courts; the functioning of the Royal Prerogative; the role of the House of Lords; and access to justice for ordinary people ... We will ensure that judicial review is available to protect the rights of the individuals against an overbearing state, while ensuring that it is not abused to conduct politics by another means or to create needless delays. In our first year we will set up a Constitution, Democracy & Rights Commission that will examine these issues in depth, and come up with proposals to restore trust in our institutions and in how our democracy operates.²²

The proposed constitutional review should be understood as part of the same agenda as the threats made by the government to national broadcasters (both the BBC and Channel 4 have been earmarked for review) to encourage a more supine media environment. The review seeks to unlock many of the inhibitions to the exercise of executive power. All those Brexit stumbling blocks (Parliament, the House of Lords, the courts and processes of judicial review) will be in the firing line for abolition or amendment, so that they can no longer thwart the 'People's Will' as expressed in the 'People's Government' (slogan copyright B. Johnson 2019).

And so?

Processes with different temporalities have come together to shape this political moment: the uneven dynamics of globalising capitalism, the unstable trajectory of Britishness, shifting national and local class formations, and the cluster of political

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feelings that drive ‘angry politics’. The 2019 election cannot be deciphered, much less responded to, as the outcome of a single cause, whether Brexit, Corbyn or the frustration of a class. We need to address this political moment as part of a conjuncture, marking a point when tensions gather, when crises and conflicts accumulate, and when political settlements lose their equilibrium and become contestable. Here we encounter different histories, different temporalities, different rhythms. The current phase of financialised capitalism, and its failings and crises, established one such rhythm. But this dynamic tends to conceal longer histories: for example, Thatcherite de-industrialisation or the unfinished post-colonial transition (and the endlessly renewable racial thinking that accompanied colonialism into the post-colonial). There is also the deep time of the global ecology, even as its pace quickens and threatens global life. Finally, we might want to consider the long running and deepening dislocations of the relations and organisation of social reproduction, including the persistent (and deepening) crisis of social care, the threadbare fabric of public services and infrastructure, intensified by austerity and the continuing privatisation of public resources.

All of those are contained and *condensed* in the present moment. This is a messy sort of analysis, but it is one which tries to point towards the full, if not overflowing, sense of the forces that come together in contradictory and antagonistic ways to produce this conjuncture. This is not just a matter of finding a mode of analysis that takes this richness seriously. It is also about becoming aware of the possibilities that are generated when these forces come together. Grasping what is condensed in the current conjuncture might help us in the search for alternatives: discerning the potential or emergent lines of affiliation, identification and mobilisation that might be constructed against the free trade, deregulatory, small state, nationalist-authoritarian fantasies of the right. We can already see some traces: environmental activism (schoolchildren’s strikes and Extinction Rebellion), the pushback against Theresa’s May’s ‘hostile environment’ and the persistent desires for public infrastructure and *social* security. We might also see emerging conceptions of politics that could link the local (where both capitalist abandonment and public infrastructure erosion are deeply felt), national and global in new ways. Finally, through a conjunctural view we could also see the new Conservative bloc as a temporary assemblage, not a permanent condition. How might a left politics speak to, and for, the multiple feelings of loss, frustration and abandonment that have swirled around the last decade?

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These are the open questions of conjunctural analysis - but they require serious thought (rather than ready-made answers). Attempting this kind of analysis involves a commitment to thinking and indeed thinking again - a sort of humility in the face of the present and the demands it makes on us. It is also, as I and others discovered, hard work: when we were writing *Policing the Crisis* in the 1970s, it took five of us to trace a narrowly British conjuncture, to examine how the landscape of politics was being reconfigured towards a 'law and order' society and the 'authoritarian populism' of Thatcherism.²³ It took a collective practice to produce that analysis - and our present troubles, too, demand collaborations and conversations to accumulate, analyse and clarify. This article is offered in that spirit ...

This has been a difficult article to write in the depressed aftermath of the 2019 election. I am grateful to the many people who gave me generous and thoughtful comments on the first draft: Alan Clarke, Allan Cochrane, Sally Davison, Larry Grossberg, Tony Jefferson, Jeff Maskovsky, Janet Newman, Bill Schwarz and Fiona Williams. Without them, it would have been much worse. Most of their comments have been incorporated into the piece, but one needs further reflection. This was the suggestion that the draft was too calm and not angry enough. I see the point but at exactly the same time as writing this I was reading Neil Gaiman's introduction to the collected non-fiction writings of Terry Pratchett, in which he suggests that Pratchett's novels (funny, fanciful and engaging) were driven by a sense of anger about the world and its injustices: 'The anger was always there, an engine that drives' (Foreword to Terry Pratchett: A Slip of the Keyboard, Corgi Books, 2014, p16). The same is true here (with a bit of added despair thrown in).

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Notes

1. Jeffrey Maskovsky and Sophie Bjork-James (eds), *Beyond Populism: Angry Politics and the Twilight of Neoliberalism*, West Virginia University Press 2020; and Pankaj Mishra, *The Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, Penguin Books 2016.
2. John Clarke, 'A sense of loss? Unsettled attachments in the current conjuncture',

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