Is 'delivery' a route out of postcolonial derangement?

Mike Makin-Waite

Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever, *Britain in Fragments: Why things are falling apart*, Manchester University Press 2023

This is a clear and lively account of British history and culture, combining and developing key themes from new left, anti-racist and post-colonial thinking. Virdee and McGeever describe the current social, economic and political malaise as deep-rooted and structural, showing how this is expressed through a 'still unfinished crisis of the British state'. Recent expressions of this crisis include 'nationalist secession movements' of contrasting character: Brexit, shaped in part 'by the rise of an authoritarian racist backlash', and the sustained and significant levels of support for Scottish independence (a sentiment not to be measured merely by the electoral fortunes of the Scottish National Party). However different in their political content and tone, each of these developments has provided people with ways of 'talking about the grievances and injuries accrued in the neoliberal epoch'.

The demise of 'the empire' is a key determinant of this situation - together with the ongoing political and cultural failure to come to terms with the major shift in Britain's position in the world which this represented. In the twenty years after the Second World War, the number of people who lived under British colonial rule fell from 700 million to five million. Taking away the material basis for its long-established economic orientation, the 'loss of empire' put the British ruling class into a position which its key members could neither understand nor address; they were intent on sustaining 'global reach' and high levels of profitability without the economic structures that could enable this. Lacking the means to 'deliver the kind of social and psychic security to its working population necessary to maintain domestic social order', the effect of the resultant choices made by successive governments

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has been to erode the 'democratic settlement' achieved between the mid-nineteenth century and the three decades following the Second World War, which saw economic growth combined with expanding welfare state provision.

The crumbling of these achievements has been allowed - facilitated - by the Labour Party, the dominant political organisation of the working class, in part because Labour adopted, together with the Conservative and Liberal elites, a 'shared commitment to empire … that stunted the full realisation of democracy'. Throughout its history, Labour 'situated its demands for working-class inclusion on the … ideological terrain of [British] nationalism'.

This commitment led to Labour first supporting 'imperial plunder' and then the 'super-exploitation of migrant labour from the Indian sub-continent and Caribbean' that underpinned welfarism into the late 1970s. Labour proved unwilling and unable to build on and realise the potential of the trade union and social struggles of the late 1970s and 1980s, which had 'helped stretch the labour movement to encompass the working class in all its ethnic diversity'.

Given Labour's failure to recast itself as a popular and radical party for changing times, Thatcherism was able to defeat these social struggles, in part by promoting 'new forms of cultural racism'. New Labour then 'gave assent' to 'the main principles of global capitalism, crafting a form of social neoliberalism that accepted key features of Thatcherism while conjoining them to a programme of increased public spending in essential infrastructure'. Blair's expansion of the Private Finance Initiative meant that New Labour's public spending was a means to further private business interests, and to promote the myth that private enterprise is necessarily more efficient than directly organised public works.

Virdee and McGeever evidence their arguments through succinct descriptions of campaigns against the 'colour bar' in the 1950s; Powellism; a range of positive and autonomous initiatives by Asian and Caribbean workers from the 1960s onwards; the 1976 Grunwick strike; Thatcher's 'authoritarian populism'; and the concoction of a mythical entity called 'the white working class' during the New Labour years. If the authors' first achievement is setting out their analysis in accessible terms, their second is to confirm its relevance by applying it to current developments.

They illustrate how left-wing subjectivities and outlooks remain compromised and limited through having been moulded by 'the twin racialising projects of

imperial and socialist nationalism', and show that this problem is reproduced among 'Corbynistas' as well as by those who are centrist or 'right-wing Labour'. For example, 'when interrogated through the eyes of Caribbean and Asian workers', the golden age of social democracy celebrated in Ken Loach's 2013 film *The Spirit of '45* is 'more appropriately understood as a catastrophe'. In exploring the limits of left-wing radicalism, Virdee and McGeever argue that the old Communist Party of Great Britain's 'programme for a parliamentary road to socialism … located its vision for socialist transformation on the same ideological terrain of British nationalism as the Labour Party' and judge that this trapped the CPGB 'in a bind of its own making': 'challenging racism directed against black and Asian workers would have required it to also challenge the British nationalism that legitimated such discrimination'.

Virdee and McGeever provide a nuanced account of how, in their view, the cause of Scottish independence has now become 'the weak point of the British state'. They suggest that, in Scotland: 'amid the historical process of de-democratisation and fragmentation, social questions have increasingly been posed in a national frame. With the decline of class as a social force, an unprecedented lateral movement away from Labour and into the independence campaign occurred'. July's general election results did see a significant reversal of this trend, but the decline in SNP support (to 30 per cent of Scottish voters) and representation (to 17 per cent of Scotland's seats in Westminster) does not mean that large numbers of recently pro-Indy Scottish voters have now re-adopted a commitment to the union state.

When first asked to review this book, my sense was that I would write a wholly positive piece: I found myself in general agreement with Virdee and McGeever's overall account, at the same time as holding differing views on some particular episodes.

Whilst actually drafting this review, however, I had the growing feeling that the book is illustrative of a wider problem. However sharp and succinct their critical points, the authors provide no real sense of how we might establish their perspectives as the dominant narrative around which politics and culture could be modernised in progressive directions, including through England beginning 'to craft a politics worthy of its contemporary multicultural citizenry'.

It wouldn't be fair to blame Virdee and McGeever for this problem. Shifting the dominant narrative is not at all easy, and cannot be achieved simply through eloquent argument. Any potentially effective attempt to shift popular understanding provokes increasingly manic resistance from those who cling to the self-deceptions

of narrow and self-interested nationalism. When promoting accessible assessments of the baleful consequences of imperialism on British political culture, for example, or suggesting that it's long overdue that the (dis)United Kingdom 'liberate itself' from a distorted and nostalgic historical narrative, writers such as Sathnam Sanghera and David Olusoga have been vilified. Alongside the racism and hostility directed at these relatively liberal authors, the intensity of the backlash perhaps involves an unconscious recognition that the time really is soon coming when people will finally leave behind the myths of imperial discourse. The anxieties and defensiveness channelled by Brexit and the ongoing resonance of Farage's toxic politics suggest that what Paul Gilroy called 'postcolonial melancholia' has morphed into a kind of postcolonial derangement which has taken hold of significant numbers of people and is now so advanced that we will only be able to recover and move on through a deep and thorough working through of this country's actual history.

Such a moving on will not happen automatically, and the unhinging and disorganisation of community relations could go in yet more dangerous directions. It's therefore important to consider the question raised by Virdee and McGeever as to whether there are 'social forces that can be constituted into an organised contraflow to arrest the fragmentation that so defines our precarious present'.

This question is brought into greater focus by the stance of the newly elected UK Labour government. Of course, members of the new government clearly intend that their policies and approach will offset the risk of increasing support for the far right. Along with their focus on 'delivery', however, Labour's approach will most likely involve further denials of the need for 'working through' the painful and complex issues inherited from the past, now cast in terms of the need to 'look forward'.

Starmer's first action on taking office was a tour of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, hoping to counter tendencies towards the break-up of the UK by promising to 'deliver' for people in these distinct places: the same sentiment informed the optics of having people waving Scottish and Welsh flags alongside the Union Flag when the new prime minister and his wife walked into Downing Street for the first time.

A positive intention to 'reset relations' also shapes David Lammy's wish to establish closer ties with the European Union, and 'reconnect to international partners' on a range of issues. There's a collaborative, open tone to the Foreign Secretary's statements as compared with his Tory predecessors, and Lammy's approach to leading the ministry which was at the centre of running the empire

will surely be shaped in welcome ways by his identity as a Black working-class descendant of enslaved people.

Unfortunately, changes at the level of intent, style and tone do not address the causes and drivers of inequality and social fragmentation (and Lammy's initial pronouncements on a range of areas do not signal any substantive redirections in policy, tending instead to 'upcycle' old tropes about Britain's purpose of playing a leading role in world affairs). Nor do such changes overcome the energies and angers which have fed the long-term rise of the populist right. Starmer's party has not proposed the level and forms of social and economic restructuring required to reset class relations so as to shrink and remove the material sources of popular *ressentiment*, disaffection and alienation channelled here by Farage, as in France by Le Pen and Bardella. Rachel Reeves's hopes for 'delivery' through growth on the basis of current economic structures limit the government's scope to invest in public services - whilst her moves to lift planning restrictions on new housing have won praise first of all from right-wing and free market thinktanks.

Though I hope I am proved wrong, my expectation is therefore that, once there's a falling away of the warm and fuzzy social-democratic feeling which was generated for some people in July 2024 by the change of government personnel, an unhealthy combination of social stasis and cultural polarisation is likely to continue to shape our life experiences and our politics. This is why the question raised by Virdee and McGeever as to whether there currently are social forces capable of organising themselves into a force that can counter some of the dangerous tendencies they discuss is so urgent.

Their answer to this question is that 'while there is no political force currently willing or able to represent it, there exists a social base for a democratic socialist politics'. This 'social base' includes those who took part in protests against mounting austerity, and the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements; socialist and green activists involved in Scotland's Radical Independence Campaign; 'two generations of the so-called precariat'; people whose lives define 'the emergence of a fragile but discernible everyday multicultural reality, particularly among younger generations'; and the trade unionists who have 'set in motion a wave of workers' militancy not witnessed in Britain for a generation'.

My feeling is that this listing combines over-optimism with a certain downplaying of the strategic challenge involved in articulating and relating the

different concerns, hopes and energies of those who Virdee and McGeever see as progressive agents - or as potentially so.

One expression of that downplaying of strategic challenges is the authors' overly simplistic presentation of political agency, reflected in part in how they talk about some organisations in rather fixed, static and essentialist terms. They talk, for example, about what Labour 'is' and why it is 'not' a vehicle for progressive change, arguing that 'any sense that the Labour Party was a vehicle for working-class advancement was lost' at the end of New Labour's period in office.

In fact, any real shift in political culture, even one primarily driven by progressive social movements and campaigns, will lead to major changes within and by political parties, and this in spite of how relentlessly Starmer and his team have foregrounded British nationalist tropes in the recent election campaign. Like the state itself, parties are continually reshaped by particular and shifting condensations of class and social forces, and are susceptible and responsive to all kinds of pressure. The centralised control achieved by Labour's leadership and officials in the run-up to the general election obscured this fact, but even at the current time it is evident that Labour is not simply 'one thing'. This can be seen in the style, tone and material initiatives of mayors including Tracy Brabin, Andy Burnham and Sadiq Khan, and by Mark Drakeford during his period as First Minister of Wales - even without going back to consider, for example, the anti-racist achievements of the Greater London Council in the early 1980s. (I would also insist that the CPGB was a complex thing, which was unsettled and changed by social dynamics including progressive responses to racism and sexism, as illustrated by Sally Davison's piece in the last issue.)

The complexities of developing effective agency are well illustrated by the election in July of four Independent MPs on a platform foregrounding support for the people of Gaza and opposition to the Israel Defense Forces' bombardment. The successes of Shockat Adam (Leicester South), Adnan Hussain (Blackburn), Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) and Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) were the most visible expressions of a wider trend. In Chingford, what would have been a winning Labour vote was split between the party's emergency candidate and Faiza Shaheen, deplorably pushed into standing independently just before the deadline for nominations, meaning that Iain Duncan Smith was able to retain the seat. Leanne Mohamad lost only narrowly to Labour's Wes Streeting in Ilford, and in Burnley

there was a 15 per cent swing to the Liberal Democrats, as campaigners identified this tactic as the best way to oppose Starmer's stance on the Gaza conflict.

In my view, it is simplistic to characterise this phenomenon as 'opposing' Labour. Shaheen was conducting an effective campaign for the party until five weeks before polling day. The Burnley Independent Councillors (who I wrote about in the last issue) believed it was they who were staying true to Labour values, rather than Starmer. In Blackburn, the former Labour councillor Salim Sidat, a central organiser of Hussain's campaign, stated that the unseated Labour MP was 'not the issue … this was not a message to Kate Hollern, because she had an excellent track record when it came to Palestine, but it was a message to the Labour leadership', and not only on Gaza: 'we just want to send a message very, very clearly to Starmer that Muslim votes should not be taken for granted'.

These sentiments are expressions of loyalty under pressure. The counter-positions of rival candidates were an expression of conflicted and strained relationships between people who share similar principles. As Labour attempts to 'win back' the voters they have lost, as Muslim activists consider their future options, and as we counter the simplistic notion that these Independent votes were 'merely' a protest about Gaza, cast only by Muslims, how things develop will be determined by combinations of local particularities as well as by broader trends and events.

It is unfortunate, then that Virdee and McGeever do not take some space to explore important place-based variations in social and political culture. They give very little sense of the ways in which multicultural questions and dynamics work out differently - or in specific ways - across the regions and in different parts of the UK: there is an almost complete absence of reference to Wales or Northern Ireland - an omission the authors seek to justify on the basis that it is events in Scotland and England 'that are pushing Britain towards its historic point of collapse'.

As detailed local dynamics play out during the period of Starmer's government, Labour's approach and reconsiderations will be crucial in shaping forms of future political engagement in dozens of constituencies. Will Starmer's big majority mean that the party seeks to reconcile and 'reset' their relationship with those who they've recently alienated or squeezed out - or will it mean that Labour is comfortable to do without these former activists and voters? Will his new 'council for regions and nations' really lead to a shift away from the UK's overcentralised state structures?

The insights which have been distilled by Virdee and McGeever will not take hold in our political life as positions asserted by the radical outsider. As part of finding ways out of the ongoing crisis, we will need to raise and promote unsettling questions and understandings within the contradictory spaces of mainstream political parties, as well as through a wide range of other organisations and cultural formations, however compromised they may be by Britain's history of having run a global capitalist empire.

Mike Makin-Waite's previous pieces for *Soundings* have reflected on local politics in Burnley, 'DIY' anti-roads protests in the late 1990s, and the democratic impulses of communism.

Feminism and all its complexities: An accessible roadmap

Hannah Curran-Troop

Catherine Rottenberg (editor), *This is not a Feminism Textbook*, Goldsmiths Press 2023

The publication of this book is timely, given that feminism (in its popular and palatable form) is now part of the everyday vernacular of contemporary media and culture. As feminist scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser has eloquently argued: 'everywhere we turn we see an expression of feminism'.[1] From celebrity culture, to social media platforms and influencers, to 'empowerment' campaigns and femvertising, to the popularisation of Greta Gerwig's 'feminist' film *Barbie*, it can seem like there's not an area of popular culture where feminism isn't in vogue.

At the same time, we're living through a global moment of political regression and polarisation for women's rights and gender equality. With increasing restrictions on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, tightening control and censorship of feminist protests, threats to LGBTQI+ rights and access to healthcare,

and alongside this the growing visibility (and far-right support) of trans-exclusionary feminism, the feminist project is faced by new and critical pressure points.

This is why this book is so urgent and important, not only for its eloquent mapping of today's key feminist issues, but for its capacity to present these to wider audiences in such accessible and creative ways. Covering foundational feminist topics such as sex and gender, the body, intersectionality, race and ethnicity, queerness, motherhood and the home, this book brings together complex theories and concepts through clear, engaging and original approaches. *This is Not a Feminism Textbook* features contributions from a broad range of feminist scholars and authors, including Celia Roberts, Amber Jamilla Musser, Simidele Dosekun, Sara Farris, Chiara Pellegrini, Cynthia Barounis, Suzanne Leonard, Yolande Strengers and Heather Berg.

Rottenberg and her contributors largely explore these issues through a historical lens, walking us through the key events shaping these varying strands of feminist thought; and they also recontextualise them within the present day. For example, in mapping feminist thinking around issues such as motherhood and carework, and introducing concepts such as matricentric feminism, new momism and emotional labour, Rottenberg draws links with everyday screen representation, as well as digital constructions of motherhood through blogging, posting and sharing photos.[2]

The book by no means presents the feminist project as a unified and singular position. Instead, through outlining a multitude of diverse (and sometimes opposing) standpoints, it reminds us that, unsurprisingly, there have always been ideological differences within feminism. Yet in introducing contested feminist topics such as sex work, pornography and trans politics, Rottenberg takes the time to present and unpack the various approaches. Tracing these debates offers invaluable nuance for readers who may be new to these issues. Such an approach feels particularly pertinent given the increased media visibility of these topics in recent years. In addition, Rottenberg encourages us to critically consider the quality of mainstream media representation, specifically around trans narratives:

> The way that these stories are reported is often sensationalist and aims to exoticise their protagonists, emphasising their difference from the majority of readers. If we have now reached the tipping point of trans visibility, it's important to ask: What exactly is visible, and what remains obscured? (p73)

Language is another recurrent theme throughout the book - one which is significant for assisting an understanding of the lineages of feminist writing and epistemologies, as well as the broader questions of gender, sexuality and power. Contributing authors also remind us of the potential of language for solidarity and inclusion. For instance, Amber Jamilla Musser's contribution outlines the expansive nature and shifting use of the term 'queer'; Cynthia Barounis discusses the disabled community's reclamation of the word 'crip'; and Chiara Pellegrini explains how pronouns and gender-inclusive language can cultivate affirmative spaces for everyone.

This is Not a Feminism Textbook also offers nuanced understandings of how particular issues have changed over time. For instance, Heather Berg's contribution explores the evolving standpoints and development in feminist thinking in relation to work, through charting a number of shifting perspectives: socialist feminism and the illumination of unwaged reproductive labour;[3] liberal feminist perspectives which see work as a form of empowerment and self-expression;[4] and the contemporary focus on gigification and short-term, precarious work (with its damaging impact on women and marginalised groups). Berg puts forward a feminist critique of casualised work, and of the contemporary injunction to 'love what you do', offering instead an argument for an 'anti-work politics' as a new form of feminist resistance to the productivity cultures and pressures of late-capitalist society.[5]

The scale of topics and material covered within the book is vast and ambitiously wide-ranging. Yet, through signposting a rich array of additional reading and resources, Rottenberg encourages audiences to delve deeper into the issues. This collection demonstrates the expansive nature of feminist thought and its close connection to contemporary social and cultural life, which in turn inspires us to read further. *This is Not a Feminism Textbook* is for anyone curious about feminism: it's for young people, for A-level teachers, for lecturers and researchers. In the words of late bell hooks: 'feminism is for everybody' - and this book provides a superb reminder.[6]

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Notes

1. S. Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Durham, Duke University Press 2018.

2. A. O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice*, Ontario, Demeter Press 2016; S.J. Douglas & M.W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*, Indiana, Indiana University Press 2004; A. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1983.

3. L. Segal, 'Slow Change or No Change?: Feminism, Socialism and the Problem of Men', *Feminist Review*, Vol 31 No 1, 1989; S. Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope: My Life in the 1970s*, London, Verso Press 2001; S. Federici, *Patriarchy of the wage: Notes on Marx, gender, and feminism*, Oakland, PM Press 2021.

4. S. Sandberg, *Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, New York, Knopf 2013.

5. B.E. Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, New Haven, Yale University Press 2017; K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Durham, Duke University Press 2011.

6. b hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, London, Pluto Press 2000.

The effluent society

Jo Littler

John Clarke, *The Battle for Britain: Crises, Conflicts and the Conjuncture*, Bristol University Press 2023

John Clarke is one of the authors of 1979's *Policing the Crisis,* that ur-text of cultural studies and critical criminology which is fêted for its influential study of 'the conjuncture': a term for the political, economic, social and cultural power dynamics of a specific era which together give it a certain shape and character. The conjunctural analysis in *Policing the Crisis* examined the racialised moral panic over 'mugging' that emerged in the UK during the 1970s. By pulling on a range of different disciplinary threads - media studies, criminology, histories of 'race', political theory - it simultaneously made sense of this specific phenomenon and wove a powerful image of the wider picture. In doing so, *Policing the Crisis*

diagnosed the authoritarian populism and implicitly the early UK variant of neoliberalism which were to become increasingly pronounced as the 1980s lurched forcefully to the right.

In *The Battle for Britain* Clarke uses conjunctural analysis to analyse the state of Britain over the past decade: to unpick its multiple crises and the surging nationalisms which found their most dramatic expression in Brexit. Trying to explain the seismic changes that have ripped through the social fabric is a large but necessary task, and Clarke does so by explicating their complicated roots, their entangled histories and geographies and their social composition, in order to make sense of the politics of the present. This is a book which yokes together abstract social theory with political anecdote, and which combines an expansive historical understanding with the ability to make sense of the popularity of the BBC programme *The Repair Shop*.

After an introduction outlining what 'conjunctural analysis' means, the two initial chapters set the scene for the emergence of Brexit. The first lays the geographical groundwork, tracing the rise of English nationalism by parsing Britain's roles in relation to the rest of world. These include a nostalgia for empire and its 'postcolonial melancholia'; its role as 'a carrier of the disease of "Anglo-Saxon" capitalism' in Europe; and its subservient 'special relationship' with a 'glossy' US. The second chapter focuses on the temporality of the conjuncture: how it has been shaped by different historical patterns from Empire to the failures of Fordism, through neoliberalism and rentier capitalism, and now the quickening pace of climate change. Broadly, Clarke argues that there are two conjunctures immediately before the present: one is the post-war/Cold War epoch, involving the end of colonialism, the rise of 'Atlantic Fordism', the family wage and social-democratic national imaginary. The second is the emergence, from 1979, of neoliberal desires and authoritarian populism: a coupling that, as Clarke says, has been made and remade ever since.

The following three chapters interpret the meanings of Brexit, considering its common framing as populism, neoliberal revolt and/or the revenge of the 'left-behind'. Clarke argues for a very different approach to that of the narrow, essentialised 'values-led' analysis beloved by certain policy-makers and political scientists (such as Sobolewska and Ford in their book *Brexitland*), in favour of considering how formations are connected or 'articulated' together, and working

from the premise that people can have multiple values and fluctuating interests and allegiances. This means that, for instance, in order to pick apart the different groupings which constituted the 'Brexit bloc', he considers the composition of class: how it is raced, gendered and embodied, and how it has shifted in social formation and representation. (For example, Clarke discusses how the working class was imagined as 'dark' in Britain in the late nineteenth century, then later became constituted as increasingly white because the formation of the welfare state, and its production of social safety nets, also worked through racialised forms of exclusion.) Having complexified the social fabric, the next chapter shows how 'the Brexit bloc' was constructed. It points out that the structure of feeling of 'loss' formed 'a critical point of articulation by enabling different groups to feel themselves being "spoken for"', even whilst they had actually 'lost' quite different things (p106). Clarke identifies all the different interest groups - from *The Daily Mail* to Cambridge Analytica to Lexit to Leave.EU - which spoke to this sense of loss with different registers and emphases by performing 'vernacular ventriloquism'.

Accounting for Brexit takes up the first half of the book. The second half analyses the dizzying 'accelerating accumulation of crises' that rolled into view after it. Here it highlights how crises are themselves the focus of attention by different groups who each attempt to define and mobilise them in their own interests. These chapters move from the neglect and exploitations of the pandemic, through racialised culture wars and the rapid reorganisations of the Conservative Party, to what 'the state' means today. Clarke charts how 'the intersection of Covid-19's racialised effects and George Floyd's murder mobilised people on a wholly unexpected scale', resulting in widespread challenges to white amnesia, which was in turn met by a right-wing backlash that found expression in debates over 'our history'. His work on the state, a topic on which he has written extensively with Janet Newman, picks its meanings apart by considering three separate crises - state capacity, state legitimacy and state authority. From the public contracts shared amongst the chumocracy during the pandemic, to the crumbling, asset-stripped, outsourced state infrastructural provision, to the sewage permitted to be pumped into our rivers and seas, J.K. Galbraith's old juxtaposition of 'private affluence and public squalor' has now, rues Clarke, become rebooted and refashioned into 'the effluent society' (p117).

The Battle for Britain is not an especially lengthy book, but it does have ten chapters alongside an introduction, two interludes and copious references. This focused

structure and friendly asides make it an accessible and pleasurable read, and mean its vast range of perspectives and approaches are easy to digest. Clarke has an unfailingly warm and generous tone. Characteristically, there are two interludes between the two main sections of the book called 'Pause for thought', in which Clarke outlines what has been and what is coming next, alongside pithy musings on the contingency and complexity of the conjuncture and of the range of past and present articulations. He emphasises how, for instance, the '"economies" of neoliberalism do not exist somewhere before, or outside the social formations into which they were inserted' (p64), and tells us how his readers have reprimanded him for using overly masculinist battle imagery. Such organisational forms, open asides and capacious digressions mean that the emphasis of the book on complexity - which it is continually at pains to make - is delivered with levity, with an accessible lightness of touch.

This, then, is a text written in the classic - if still far too underused - vein of socially and politically informed analysis of the conjuncture; a work which is interdisciplinary and creative in approach and expression; a book which shows cultural studies at its best. Of course there is plenty left unsaid, plenty of other texts it could it have mentioned, plenty of areas that need more elaboration (at times I wanted more on the platform capitalism, on the young, on gender, even more statistics). But one book cannot do everything. It is a wonderful book to learn from, read and think with. It describes issues we know in evocative and useful ways. I keep remembering one particularly striking passage on the 'decollectivisation' of neoliberal culture and its disaggregation of the 'connective tissues' of society (p80). There are also numerous insightful analytical jewels modestly buried amidst chapters. I had been thinking about how so much of contemporary culture and politics reminds me of the 1980s, feels like the 1980s redux, and Clarke helped me see more clearly how and why this is. He describes the Liz Truss moment as 'zombie Thatcherism', borrowing from Jamie Peck's idea of zombie neoliberalism, in which the living dead of free-market revolution continue to walk the earth, becoming more erratic in each iteration. What Clarke describes earlier in the book as 'the couplet of neoliberal desires and authoritarian populism' is half-alive and kicking us all.

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