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Left problems, nationalism and the crisis

Crises abound. Crises that might be productively seized, or crises that usher in a new threshold of capitalist governance no longer tempered by the nominal equality of juridical liberalism or the egalitarian reflexes of redistributive social democracy. Whatever else Brexit, Trump, Farage, Le Pen, Sanders and now Corbyn are, they all seem to indicate a crisis – a moment of rupture, a proliferation of new horizons, and a centre that cannot hold. On the left, the ‘full automation now’ and universal basic income Neo-Keynesianism of the bright young things finds affinity in the avuncular socialism of Sanders and Corbyn. Elsewhere, a popular authoritarianism, committed amongst other things to overseeing the full ravages of climate change, butts up against far right neo-reactionism.

Many of these positions found some degree of articulation in the run up to the 2017 General Election – an election initially intended to clear the path for Teresa May's [Home Office styled authoritarianism](#). Thankfully, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party won an unexpected number of seats, forcing a shift in parliamentary discourse. This shift moderated right wing populist vehemence, and, following the tragedy of Grenfell, contributed towards a renewed consideration of social welfare. However, before that transpired, what Emejulu terms an emboldened '[revanchist](#)' nationalism had already consolidated itself at the centre of English politics, and, in spite of the renewed optimism of the Corbyn moment, that formation has only marginally dissipated.

Much of the past decade had after all seen nationalism become the most reliable broker of electoral power. It had informed the rise of far-right populisms whilst also fortifying centre-right rule across the West. This nationalist revival manifested along multiple registers. At times, the emphasis is economic protectionism. Elsewhere, it rails, not without justification, against the dictates and opacity of various supranational institutions, not least the European Union. Sometimes, it amounts primarily to a rustic nostalgia for something primordial. Common, however, is a consistent compulsion to place the bulk of a society's challenges at the door of racialised ethnic communities, domestic and foreign.

As western capitalism reneges on some of its key promises of the *trente glorieuses* (1945-1975), it is painfully frustrating that nationalism is rehabilitated as the most likely custodian of political discourse. It is doubly frustrating that some who propagate for a left alternative also seem wedded to the nation – in asserting control over migration, over defence, over security, and over how we imagine our everyday sense of community. As these frustrations multiply, we believe it timely to sketch out a more historically attuned reckoning of the relationship between the current crisis and xenophobic nationalism, including an engagement with whiteness and the working class. At its simplest, we only wish to press the importance of recognising the central role of racial nationalism in recent governance. Our more overarching contention is that a realisation of alternative left visions for governance must as a minimum start with the repudiation of xenophobia's hold on contemporary politics, and the left's routine submission to its lustre.

That reckoning is, in a small way, necessary to appreciate the initial electoral success delivered by a Corbyn-led Labour. Any alternative model for mutual care and sociability

will be sustained by energies outside the Labour party, not within it. But it is nonetheless vital to note that Corbyn not only insisted on a substantial social democratic programme – rare to recent centre-left agendas; but he also declined the call to rally nationalist shibboleths – although he did not advocate for migrants’ rights either. His partial success is then accounted for by not having bartered with key nationalist agitations. Instead of capitulating to nationalist populisms, he presented an anti-establishment social democracy with popular appeal.

But to say this, is also to note that nationalist agitations remain intact. As the dust settles on the election, nationalism has begun to return to left politics, parliamentary and otherwise, because it never left. In parliamentary Labour, we see Corbyn’s initial quietism on migrants’ rights accumulating a [more recognisable anti-migrant language](#); we see it in the recent pronouncements of MPs [Gloria De Piero and Graham Jones](#) on the white working class; and we see it in the formation of [John Denham’s English Labour Network](#). As such, aside from a limited defeat of right wing authoritarianism, it seems little else has changed. Optimism has certainly returned, even the word ‘socialism’, but the crisis which forged the nationalist demand, which props up its contradictions, which keeps Philip May’s [investments in tax avoiding multinationals healthy](#), is still very much a reality. The left must then not only reject nationalism but do so on certain terms, based on a solid understanding of the contemporary crisis in which it arises.

As with so many times before, Stuart Hall helps us answer this call. Until recently a less used dimension of his vocabulary, Hall’s commentary on the ‘crisis’ [has been recalled](#). The parallels between now and then are clear enough. Hall’s crisis of 1970s and 1980s social democracy is after all the direct antecedent of our own, wherein the *popular* gradually yielded to the *populist*.

Hall observed how under Callaghan, but more prominently in Thatcherism, the formal ideals of democracy became eroded, accruing a more authoritarian guise. As market-society programmes were enforced, the broader conditions necessary for labour security, social mobility, comprehensive public provisions, and affordable networks of community based leisure dissipated. Confidence in the democratic contract was accordingly threatened. What supplanted the resulting democratic void was an intensified emphasis on belonging to the nation; a belonging premised on certain fundamental exclusions. That is to say, this was a renewed and affirming cult of belonging based on identifying the threats posed by generally racial, frequently classed, and sometimes unionised, outsiders. Here, a familiar cast of pathological presences begin to obtain their fuller political definition – the nihilistic black male, the degeneracy of the multi-ethnic inner city, and, not least, the (increasingly Muslim) migrants ‘swamping’ the realm. These appeared alongside the periodic assertion of remembered imperial glory via select military campaigns – the Northern Ireland Troubles and Falklands being particularly significant.

The slide towards nationalist authoritarianism could then be narrated (employing a degree of hyperbole) along the following lines. The democratic project no longer hinged on the conception of a collective good; no longer aspired to deliver a shared social arrangement; no longer envisioned a society that could deliver a socio-economic stake for all its denizens. Instead, the democratic moved its operational centre towards identifying populist objects of threat, disruption, decay and dependency amidst both the body politic and at its borders. For Hall, this was not the same as saying racialised

alarmism and policing offered cover for market reforms, though it is partly that. It was to note the more fundamental shift in the locus of democratic governance and desire itself – a pivot toward authoritarian populism, understood elsewhere as ‘parliamentary dictatorship’, collected and sutured by nationalism.

Of course, the advent of Blairism seemed initially to constitute a departure from this doubling of capital and nation. While Blairism certainly represented the consolidation of neoliberal common sense, tying the cult of [enterprise](#) and the animal spirits of [competition](#) to an edifice of urban chic, it also momentarily muted the little Englander defensiveness characteristic of Thatcherite neoliberalism. This reading is however something of a misnomer. First, the initial (if piecemeal) commitments to race equality legislation and multicultural Britain was in actuality awkwardly embedded within a resurgent core of [white popular cool](#), as embodied by indie band Blur and its up-beat white nostalgia. Second, the move away from heavily worn assertions of Britishness, minority threat and xeno-racism was largely reversed through the return to a ‘community cohesion’ thesis borne out of the 2001 northern disturbances and increased hectoring against asylum seekers. This general recourse to integrationism was then indirectly hitched to the already available imperial nostalgia, lived through and repackaged in a manner suitable for early Twenty-first Century sensibilities via the militarism of 2001 onward, but already primed in the seeming successes of Kosovo and the Ivory Coast.

It was of course not only the Labour Party that rehearsed the return of nationalism. After a confident first three years, New Labour became reactive, easily pressed into a political agenda compelled by the opposition Conservatives and its own well-worn nationalist impulses. Failing to redistribute wealth and lacking anything substantive to champion beyond a scramble for a fetishized ‘centre’, as an end in itself, Labour in the 2000s was apologetic and defensive, dancing uneasily to the tune of an emboldened right wing press. As such, it was during New Labour’s reign that the popular consensus around immigration as unequivocally problematic, Muslims as unequivocally ominous, and multiculturalism as unequivocally bust was secured. In short, the [‘soft racism of the hard centre’](#) became firmly entrenched. All that subsequently remained was for its more virulent spokespersons to promise nationalism’s more spectacular palliative potential.

The resulting nationalist consolidation occurred however under conditions distinct from those discussed by Hall. In Hall’s analysis, the ideal subject lionised by Thatcherism was the self-determined meritocratic individual – personified in the petit bourgeois shop owner (and therefore Thatcher herself). The threading of free market capitalist ideology through the mundane fabric of the new town and suburban high street permitted the dismantling of the welfare state and the incremental application of market logics to all human relations. It was consequently the petit bourgeois Poujadist who became the ideal nationalist subject, characterised by a deep private innocence and smallness under siege, but also a familial innocence largely at home with capitalist mantras.

Today the mythopoesis of the shopkeeper, the ‘self-made man’, and the striver scarcely delivers in material terms. It is not even a consistent emphasis in Tory dogma. Rather, ‘the market’ gradually displaces the myth of the shopkeeper as the ideal neoliberal subject. The market is of course a pseudonym for the triumph of global finance capital. In Home Counties’ high streets, we see this operationalized in the Conservatives’ house-price indexed [business rate hikes](#). Bases of traditional Conservative power, such as the fabled entrepreneur, are sacrificed to the exigencies of the corporate multinational, to

Tesco and Costa, and to the rationales of the market. However, this shift from local to global is certainly not a rejection of the nation. Indeed, the Brexit themed neoliberalism of global trade utopians Liam Fox, Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and David Davis engineers its own potent version of nationalist assertion. Neoliberalism is first and foremost an ideology of enterprise and all objects come under its purview, including the nation. Construed as competitive, cost effective engines of pure accumulation, the nation too is then reimagined as enterprise – a visualisation with overtly colonial overtones. It is the ghost of the East India Company that haunts Liam Fox’s desire for an [‘Empire 2.0’](#).

This remains however a particular rendering of the national project that reneges on a formal affinity with Little England. It is a neoliberal project that is gradually uninterested in petty bourgeois conservatism. But this is not to say that neoliberalism does not continue to inform the quotidian fabrics of local life too. The ideology of the free market is still found in street level anxiety about the failure to self-actualise the myth of merit, but these fixations with the optimising-self sit alongside the reality of job precarity, income stagnation, widening inequality, diminished public services, the advent of disciplinary welfare (‘workfarism’), rising costs of living, accelerated urban restructuring, the formal end to the promise of social mobility, and increased social atomisation. As such, whilst our dominant ‘structure of feeling’ may still be petit bourgeois capitalist, the truth is that its conceits of mobility and meritocracy run up too frequently against these social and economic realities. The cultural investment in ideals of competition and the sanctity of enterprise do not then even remotely align with the wider realities of socio-economic stagnation, austerity regimes, and the resultant individual struggle and hardships. Contemporary neoliberalism is global-hegemonic, and as such any promise of freedom it does contain is for the majority too far away.

It is because of these realities, increasingly undeniable, that we are said to be currently witnessing the [partial crumbling of the neoliberal consensus](#). Across Europe, more confident challenges to the austerity conceit are materialising. It is our concern however that the potential diminution of neoliberal logics still leaves intact the emboldened chauvinistic attachments to nation and whiteness that characterised the other side of that same governmental coin. Put differently, nationalism is all that remains of the established ruling culture when, or if, the consensus around neoliberalism and its austerity politics starts to slip. The task of a renewed non-racist left should therefore be to subject all calls to nationalist myopia and defensiveness to the same hard-won rebuke that leftists otherwise reserve for neoliberal capitalism. To soft pedal on this task, or worse yet, to accept some core nationalist nostrums would be to succumb to the shape of governance already rehearsed over recent history. Only now, its partial untethering from former capitalist bedfellows allows for xeno- and anti-Muslim racisms to obtain a greater and more pernicious autonomy.

The ability to map these distinctions and transformations is notably absent in certain branches of the left. We might say that failure on these grounds has become habit. These corners of the left are even fond of citing [Trump](#), [Brexit](#) and [Le Pen](#) as the result of straightforward anti-capitalist impulses. This version of the crisis critique, endorsed in part by journalist [Paul Mason](#), and often put forward by merchants of progressive contrarianism and/or self-styled spokespersons of working-class authenticity, then accepts retrenchment to the nation as an anti-neoliberal move. The fact that some middle-class people oppose nationalism further compounds their mistaken notion that the new nationalist cry must be anti-capitalist, or at the very least, a recognisable act of

anti-elite, working-class assertion. This is bad Marxism done worse. It takes the metaphor of oppositional class interests and writes it into every streak, corner and recess of culture and ideology. Such arguments have already [received some critical attention](#), but its continued prominence in left-nationalist circles means it merits more. And whilst we cannot address here every rendition of how nationalism obtains a leftist inflection, we do want to isolate here a select few angles that we believe to be particularly misleading.

A prominent left-nationalist move regarding contemporary crisis is the ‘working class has spoken’ ploy. Here, the multiple dimensions of nationalism are reduced to a working-class politics, an insurrection via the ballot box. Anti-immigration becomes a normalised sentiment of working class populations (denying the petit bourgeois triumph that the nation actually is) at the same time as it is read as anti-capitalist politics (as opposed to the anti-minority xeno-racism that it so belligerently affirms).

One trope key to this reading of Brexit, Trump and aspects of May is a supposed ‘cosmopolitanism’ versus ‘working class culture’ distinction. This distinction has two dimensions. First, it is said that the working class lacks the resources to cultivate attitudes more receptive to immigration and its resultant ethnic diversity; and second, cosmopolitanism (read multiculturalism and anti-racism) is characterised as merely an exercise in middle class metropolitan self-aggrandisement and ultimately superfluous to any genuinely progressive project. This argument, recently aired by [Wolfgang Streeck](#) but apparent in other commentaries on [class and culture](#), alleges that a resource deficit is said to explain resentment towards migration and ethnic diversity among the working class. And, by the same token, it is argued that cosmopolitan resources are the preserve of the middle classes. Ignorance of this resource deficit is then put down to the smug arrogance of metropolitan elites.

Some important truths need restating here. First, this above conceit ignores many apparent dynamics of our cities. The unspectacular commitment to multiculturalism occasioned by the quotidian textures of much urban life, that is to say a city habitus common to many black, brown and white working class people, is well-documented. As such, it is hard to seriously justify the suggestion that an alleged liberal middle class has the resource monopoly on cosmopolitanism.ⁱ Although many middle class people might nominally share the rhetorical commitment to multiculturalism, they are scarcely its only or even primary agents or symbols. Indeed, much, though not all, of what is narrated as being a middle class embrace of cosmopolitanism might rather be seen as the rather thin marketplace consumption of ethnic diversity. It is often a form of cosy realisation of self via consumer discernment – rather than an extension of sociability, care and concern – that is sometimes forgotten when Polish off licences outnumber bespoke coffee shops, when multicultural neighbours become noisy nuisances, and when these personal discomforts are weaponised through the police, spending power, and property prices.

To reiterate, the reality of many urban working class areas discredits the thesis that a resource deficit between middle class and working class populations explains wariness of migration and ethnic diversity. The suspicion of what is called cosmopolitanism here, when it does indeed materialise, is therefore best accounted for elsewhere. Namely, the presence of ethnic minorities becomes a basis for resentment only when it runs up again thickly textured defensive narratives of the nation.ⁱⁱ

That this analysis is often forgotten is perhaps on account of the melancholic [visualisations of the working-class as white](#).ⁱⁱⁱ It is particularly important to deconstruct this invocation because of the sense of victimhood and injury it offers nationalism. In this assessment, the working class is invested with whiteness, and this whiteness is presented as being under threat by migration, political correctness, equalities politics, and the very idea of a multi-ethnic society itself. Leftist social science has become particularly good at recycling this canard; a canard in which class exclusion is either used to explain all other features of modernity and/or white interviewees' testimonies on the dangers of migration are presented as unmediated social truths. In both cases, proper analyses of culture and race go missing. These articulations occur in a wider left discursive environment that too often presumes the historic entitlement of 'indigenous' white working-class people. Weaned on soap operas, the memory of a Blitz spirit, the golden era of the welfare state, and football as it used to be, many left vanguardists indulge this position by distinguishing the entitlements of the white working class against the illegitimate claim to the same made by 'new migrants'.

When left scholars claim that the white working class have unique grievances against capitalism, conterminously understood as legitimate grievances against the pressures put on them by immigration, they are not then sufficiently interrogating the relation between whiteness and the nation. What is more, they are conveniently constructing a lived reality of whiteness that is not easily borne out in many working class multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, although its discursive operationalization does certainly threaten to remake the realities of these areas.

Such a position also refuses to acknowledge the contingent porosity of whiteness and how its symbolic '[wages](#)' are often claimed by populations who a generation or two ago would not have been white enough. It is through this lens that we can actually start to understand the ways in which whiteness and anti-immigration sentiments coexist, and the ways in which they become a repertoire through which some working class people are encouraged to make sense of their social and economic marginalisation. It is also from here that we can account for the complexities of xeno-racism as they characterise multi-ethnic parts of our cities: where hostilities to 'newcomers' can be mobilised by those who claim whiteness but related exclusions can also be adopted by some black and minority ethnic people who reject white supremacy yet favour exclusionary territorial claims - 'I was here first'. This internally discrepant but nonetheless majoritarian discourse of exclusion is in fact where we should be focusing our attention.

In sum, the left-nationalist argument hinges on a conflation of essentialised and fetishised whiteness with working class struggle and anti-capitalism. The defence of class then becomes a defence of whiteness, and, by extension of the nation, a defence of anti-immigration politics. This reading of working class politics is in short an argument for nationalism, and for racism, and inevitably harms working people.

More constructively, we instead point out that contemporary nationalist discourse is not a speciality of the working class but has historically developed across a number of prominent platforms, each of which has been important to the recent political history of Western Europe. These multiple discursive heritages include but are not limited to: the *liberal* - nation in relation to Eurocentric interpretations of tolerance, free speech, secularism, the rule of law and civility; the *neoliberal* - nation as mediator of economic enterprise and 'homo economicus'; the *conservative* - nation in nostalgic relation to the provincial, imperial, Christianist, or rustic white; and the *communitarian left* - nation in

relation to the welfare state and broader anti-market, anti-globalisation sentiments. The ideological contouring of nationalism at the present moment requires all these various repertoires.

This argument constitutes therefore a reminder to those with left or left-of-centre leanings that nationalism cannot be opportunistically gamed for anti-capitalist ends. Nationalism is itself the populist play. All else becomes marshalled in its service. As [Maya Goodfellow comments](#), to realise a popular politics without appealing to the totems of anti-immigrant xeno-racism might seem a Sisyphean task. But it is the challenge that must be reckoned with, as otherwise one merely gives succour to the nationalist call. Nationalism is never simply a means to other political ends, not least left collectivism. Nationalism is always, in the final instance, about its own exclusionary racisms – anything else is a convenient bedfellow rallied to make its appeal more likely.

ⁱ Just as it is hard to imagine that the city is the unique preserve of the metropolitan elite or that xeno-racism only exists in multi-ethnic areas.

ⁱⁱ This is not to suggest that all historically working class areas are the same but it is to refute the general argument that working class people lack a cosmopolitan disposition. Similarly, we note that those susceptible to strong anti-minority and anti-immigration views are not actually more likely to live in areas with large ethnic minority and migrant populations. See for instance, Rydgren and Ruth on the [‘halo-effect’](#) and the politics of the radical right in Sweden or consider the [‘rural heartlands’](#) that form the core support of the French Front National.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also Shilliam’s forthcoming book, [The Deserving Poor: Colonial Genealogies from Abolition to Brexit](#). The book traces the broader histories of how the emergence of the British welfare state was contingent on broader colonial conceptions of a *deserving* white poor vis-à-vis the undesirability of the racialised, non-white colonial poor. Shilliam offers here a genealogy of how contemporary mobilisations of the ‘white working class’ as a political category speaks to a much longer and deeply entrenched colonial lineage.