

## Nationalism, the mob and left dreams

Article (Accepted Version)

James, Malcolm and Valluvan, Sivamohan (2019) Nationalism, the mob and left dreams. *Renewal: A journal of social democracy*, 27 (4). pp. 35-40. ISSN 0968-252X

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/89522/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

# Nationalism, the Mob, and Left Dreams

Malcolm James and Sivamohan Valluvan

At the recent Tory Conference, Party Chairman James Cleverly ominously warned that civil unrest awaited Britain should Brexit be frustrated. Setting in train a shift in Britain's post-war political settlement, a mob was being quietly called to defend the nation – to right the wrongs being done to it.

-----

But lest this be read as simply another unanticipated symptom of a purportedly 'polarized' and 'extreme' *present*, Cleverly's politics has in fact been many decades in the making. Forty years ago, Britain was experiencing a structural crisis of capitalism. That crisis was rooted in a declining manufacturing base, diminished technological competitiveness, a weakened global trade position, and deepening regional inequalities. And it was out of the stagnation of this era-defining [crisis](#) that 'Thatcherism', as coined by the late Stuart Hall, was able to forge its infamous campaign of pro-market transformations.

This was a transformation whose '[common sense](#)' purchase was not only sourced in the purported virtues of capitalist merit, but was also tied to a populist-nationalism characterised by an authoritarian appeal to 'law and order' and its attendant logics of national identity. This was, in other words, a political project that traded on an aggressive modelling of the normative national subject – white, petite-bourgeois and provincial – and the threats allegedly posed to it by, amongst other things, Black youth, immigrants '[swamping](#)' the realm, unions, and the IRA.

The broader ideologies of deviance through which Britain had legitimated its rule in the colonies, through which Eurocentric modernity had mapped its racial Others, through which nationalists (of different ideological formations) had railed against outsiders, and through which the Edwardian establishment had distinguished the working classes, provided a deep archive for this populist theatre. However, as Hall again took great care to explain, this is not to say that Thatcher's Tories did not have an electoral base that remained confident about the aggressively pro-market projects being introduced. On the contrary, while the Tories worked hard to split the working class, as well as leveraging the spectre of the outsider to optimal electoral effect, they also located their project in the capitalism of the high street. In short, their market evangelism depended electorally on the

proverbial 'Little Englander' imagining an economic stake in a more profitable Tory future.

-----

For Thatcher and her immediate successors, a symbolism of British business was part and parcel of the nationalist project. [Today however](#), the Tory party is not remotely connected to the high street; its economic affinities are instead more firmly aligned to a small smattering of opaque hedge funds, as Boris Johnson's campaign war chest [attests](#). As this Conservative Party becomes further disconnected from the populist mandate of 'British business', it is the debris of Thatcherism's authoritarian nation-craft that it reaches for. Alongside the comments of James Cleverly, consider Boris Johnson's use of the police as a prop in [Wakefield](#), Michael Gove's comments on [flouting](#) the Supreme Court ruling, Rees-Mogg's contemptuous [repose](#) in parliament, and even just the ['fuck business' rhetoric](#) that is now being wielded to great populist effect by Tory grandees. All of which are gestures that begin to signal a political leadership intent on circumventing the inconveniences of democracy rather than playing to its legitimacy. In short, Boris Johnson and his team seem to be previewing a nationalist repertoire of authoritarian rule by attacking key markers of democracy – particularly parliament and the judiciary, but even, it seems, many of the stakeholders of British enterprise itself.

No longer able to speak credibly for high-street capitalist uplift, today's right has little but nationalist ['resentment'](#) with which to cohere its public. The degraded symbols of parliament, the judiciary and even business itself then join an ever-growing chain of demons against which a nationalist grievance can be asserted: racialised Others, migrant outsiders, EU [mandarins](#), Greta Thunberg, feminism, Jewish philanthropists, the Pope, and even just general geographies (e.g. the much-loathed ['North London'](#) and those other hubs where 'metropolitan' matcha-drinking 'liberals' are said to congregate).

This entrenchment helps explain the recourse of today's Tories to the frenzied language of 'betrayal'. Boris Johnson's use of terms like 'surrender bill' has received considerable critical attention but less has been noted about the deep psychic wounds such language excites in the nation. Like Johnson's ongoing Winston Churchill pastiche, the longing evoked here belongs to what Paul Gilroy refers to as Britain's ['postcolonial melancholia'](#). The language of war and 'do or die' brinkmanship recalls the nation-making lore of the Second World War, and a mournful (if impossible) desire to relive the buccaneering glories of Britannia and/or just a lost rustic idyll suffused by the moral clarity of white English homogeneity.

As [Fintan O'Toole](#) makes apparent, it is the very impossibility of this recourse to glorious 'sovereignty' that further hardens the play to all things parochial and chauvinistic. Namely, we find ourselves amidst a toxic paradox where national affirmation, illusory as it is, can only happen through an ever-hardening aversion towards the 'outside' and those who do not belong. This is an appeal to the national collective less as 'people' and more as 'mob'; a politics of negation that is fed only by more negation.

We see, in sum, the full usurping of the Tory right by the nationalist imperative, leaving the party's other 20<sup>th</sup> century commitments in tatters. Their fabled notions of prudent pragmatism, the family business, and even purportedly liberal freedoms all expire when a '[disaster nationalism](#)', and the 'bonfire of the vanities' it desires, becomes the main drive.

---

Liberal resistance has unsurprisingly relied on an appeal to law, procedure and constitutionalism; the Supreme Court victory of Gina Miller against the proroguing of parliament being particularly prominent here. This response is understandable, even creditable. But it does also rely on a form of political intervention that vacates the popular by focusing attentions on institutional procedure. In turn, it leaves uncontested the broader appeal of authoritarian nationalism, and more problematically, distracts from a popular left-led opposition and renewal.

Those who suppose that such a renewal is to be more easily found in a return to centrist moderation should remember that it was precisely the putative centrism of the Blair-Cameron pivot that rehearsed the belligerent nationalist assertion we are living today. The hectoring about inadequate integration, the Islamophobia of the war-on-terror and its security logics, and the unwillingness to defend immigration, multiculturalism and even just the idea of Europe were all nurtured here. The gilded frame of 'reasonable moderation' is thoroughly tarnished in that light.

The hope of renewal through left nationalism fares worse still. The recycling of assorted nativist canards, particularly through the neologism of '[white working class](#)', is little more than an appeal to white authenticity and entitlement. As we have [written elsewhere](#), such a project betrays any commitment to the actual material, socioeconomic interests of the working class as well as bankrupting the left's anti-racist credentials. Furthermore, the left cannot even move forward on these terms, as the right will always have greater political claim to such terrain. As [Malik has argued](#), the left becomes only a witless 'handmaiden' in such a scenario.

Mette Frederiksen, Leader of the Social Democrats in Denmark, is a case in point. Frederiksen's loud seconding of highly controversial anti-immigration initiatives and so-called 'ghetto laws' paved her way to the premiership. But in so doing she has given succor to an [intensified nationalism](#), proving again that nationalist positions cannot be parlayed for opportunist purposes.

As Frederiksen shows, the helmspeople of nationalist electoral 'stunts' become obliged to unleash and/or intensify a state programme commensurate to that nationalism and its often racialised politics of loss, grievance and fear. The call of nationalism is never just the benign show of patriotic solidarity that some wish it to be; but instead, it constitutes a non-negotiable commitment to delivering the aforementioned 'negation'. In short, left stewardship of nationalism will only deepen the problems of this moment, rather than resolving them.

We accordingly contend that, instead of raiding nationalism in pursuit of a hollow political legitimacy, the left will find better clues for its programme of renewal in the form of the crisis itself. After all, one of the things the ['clamour for nationalism'](#) does also ably signal is an appetite for a politics of ambition bigger than the inhibited technocracies of the 1990s/2000s. This is not to say that today's nationalism is simply an anti-capitalism that can be redirected. It is instead to note that an alternative attempt at decidedly adventurous renewal might also have some success if ventured.

The story of authoritarian nationalism we have sketched here is certainly sobering, but these are not the only horizons the present carries. We still live with the residues of powerful alternative modernisms. Welfarism, redistribution, anti-colonialism and civil rights struggle are still motifs that captivate. And entrenched in everyday life are forms of social and emotional care and an array of mutualisms that can still forcefully challenge the politics of closure. For instance, our multiethnic cities are comprised of social practices that refuse exclusionary politics (even if such exclusionary claims do of course persist here too in significant ways). There is also an emergent left politics being cohered around radical climate consciousness and a planetary sense of mutual responsibility (as opposed to perpetual extraction). This is a politics that has significant potential and represents a terrain on which the right cannot easily win.

Many of these energies are being currently revived by the millennials of the Corbyn left, and it remains frustrating that they are being met only with lukewarm reserve. And yes, while electorally their policies are unlikely to meet instant success, it is part of a longer staking of a popular left politics that is equal to the historical scale that is required.

Needless to say, such a politics should acknowledge, as a matter of first principle, the need for a coherent anti-nationalist formation. The increasingly confident drift towards authoritarian nationalism represents a world-historical move that privileges the command style of state capitalism, strong-man charisma, and sustained assaults, both real and symbolic, on minorities, migrants, borders, environmentalists, and other sites of dissent. These are the governmental closures being rehearsed the world over. Nothing less than the embedding of an alternative collectivist programme imagined outside of the myopia of communitarian chauvinism will be required to stem this tide.