a christmas gift *from* new socialist

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The Comedification of Politics; The Politicisation of Comedy

by Willow Lloyd

In tandem with a growing distrust in politicians and journalists, the public sphere in the US and the UK is becoming increasingly comedified. Comedic bits taking on social and political questions of import – like Stewart Lee's demolition of Paul Nuttall, excerpted from his BBC show Stewart Lee's *Comedy Vehicle* – are cut out, uploaded, tweeted and retweeted.

Socialism is not simply about new economic relations, but about creating a whole new culture with new ways of feeling. Moreover, political motivation involves a great deal more than a simple deduction from class location and economic conditions. For as Theweleit wrote, '[t]he success of fascism demonstrates that masses who become fascist suffer more from their internal states of being than from hunger or unemployment.' Therefore, in the struggle for hegemony nothing should be left aside: the left must use the whole arsenal of art, feeling, and sensu-

ousness in struggle. We must be comedic and critical, eliciting joy and laughter while opening the way to liberation. However, with the far-right currently using humour as propaganda – something best exemplified by the campus talks of Milo Yiannopoulos and the provocateur comedy of Sam Hyde – there abounds a suspicion about the viability of an explicitly political left comedy. Would a left comedy involve merely inserting a left content into the forms of Yiannopoulous or Hyde – in other words, presenting a 'Milo of the left'? Or is there a uniquely left-wing way to approach stand-up comedy, one more in tune with the intrinsic characteristics of the art form itself? With Yiannopoulous or Hyde, moreover, although their performances parallel comedy in general or stand-up comedy more particularly, because of failings that are ethical as much as aesthetic, they should not be described as stand-up acts. While stand-up tends towards criticality, and has an element of collectivism baked into it in the audience-performer interaction, it would be wrong to say therefore that stand-up is necessarily leftist. Nonetheless, the ethics emerging from the structure constituted by the relation of comedian to audience makes stand-up a potentially fertile terrain for the left. ## Fascism Comedifies Politics Described by some as a 'comedian', Milo is, however, no stand-up comic: relying on lecterns and PowerPoint presentations, he avoids the nakedness of genuine stand-up performance. These props of his serve as armour for the 'intellectual' character act, the charade he has constructed. They work as defences against audience criticism and possibly against his own self-doubt. The stand-up comedian, by contrast, is generally naked: they have nothing with which to guard themselves against the audience but their body and speech. Yiannopoulos's performances, therefore (and they are certainly performances), may make his audiences laugh – and in that sense they could be described as comedy. They are certainly not stand-up, however, for they lack this radical baring of oneself to the audience sans assisting props: Milo symbolically shields himself from the crowd (or tries to), giving no opportunity for the display of abjection often found in stand-up as an art form proper.

If Milo stretches the definition of 'comedian', Sam Hyde sits more comfortably in that category. A viral video producer and member of sketch troupe Million Dollar

Extreme, Hyde is a visible member of alt-right fascist networks online. Million Dollar Extreme had a TV show with Adult Swim before it was cancelled in late 2016, after controversy took hold over the offensiveness of the sketches and Sam Hyde's own politics.

Hyde first became well known online for a comedic stunt in which he hijacked a TED Talk at Drexel University. Dressed in gladiator armour, he delivered a lecture titled '2070 Paradigm Shift'. The act moves in style and content between a parody of a TED Talk and the open profession of Turner Diaries-style far-right viewpoints. In it he describes culture as a 'sewer' and predicts race war. Hyde is also known for a stunt called 'Privileged White Male Triggers Oppressed Victims, Ban This Video Now and Block Him' in which he reads out a list of pseudoscientific 'facts' justifying homophobia to an increasingly hostile Williamsburg audience. Sometimes called 'anti-comedy', Hyde's activities have puzzled some, who have wondered: does he really believe what he says, or is it all an ironic act? Though Hyde has refused to be pinned down on his politics in interviews a visit to his Twitter account, @Night_0f_Fire, should dispel any notion of irony. Nonetheless it's this liminal position – is it a joke or not? – that gives him a certain power. Yiannopoulos has benefited from a similar ambiguity, being seen by some as a provocateur who doesn't really believe what he says, this quality lending him legitimacy even when he insists he does believe it. ## This is outrageous; it's contagious Alongside these far-right attempts at humour comes a particular theory of comedy as a carnivalesque space in which anything can be said or done, rather than as an art form which comes with the same ethical and political responsibilities for the author as any other. Memes like Pepe and the 'shitlord culture' of 4chan are part of this constellation of far-right humour. Yiannopoulos praises this new comedic thing for its fearless, 'mischievous' explosion beyond the limits of acceptable discourse, and tends to falsely construes much of its antics as knowing irony borne of frustration with PC speech-policing, rather than as genuine fascist speech. In this reactionary theory of comedy, which works as a cover for propaganda, outrage and offense are made to be central. Within this putatively value-free space of comedy, one finds what Theweleit called the 'utopia of fas-

cism [as] an edenic freedom from responsibility'. Therefore a theory of comedy as a space of unrestricted speech, free from responsibility, allows real politics to masquerade hypocritically as a joke in a way that trivialises politics; that comedifies it. Thus, following Benjamin, if the right comedifies politics, the left should politicise comedy.

Can Sam Hyde's activities be classified as stand-up comedy? His primary audience seems to be his sympathisers watching via the internet, rather than his live audience. The latter are being pranked, and their reactions supply much of the entertainment for the former group. Some have called his work 'anti-comedy', though, usually, 'anti-comedy' means audiences laughing at an intentional non-joke – a joke that is funny because it subverts a traditional form. But Hyde's performances often elicit little laughter at all. Audience members sit in silence, vocally resist, or walk out. And eliciting this response is his intent. Hyde's activities, although he performs in comedy clubs, would be better described not as anti-comedy but as anti-stand-up. Stand-up comedy is a live art form in which the joke is co-created by audience and performer. Hyde's activities, by contrast, *hijack* the setting and expectations of stand-up comedy but use it to disseminate right-wing social critique. Generally, stand-up comics are in a relationship of creative intimacy with their audience. This relationship is not necessarily without tension – but if a comic challenges the crowd to see the world differently, or even offends them, they at least attempt to do it while getting them to laugh along, and are all the more persuasive for that. Total contempt for the audience is rare, and not sustainable for a stand-up comedian. ## Comedy and Contradiction

Though stand-up comedy as bigotry, as in the reinforcement of existing social relations through mockery, is nothing new, the form can also be used as a means of emancipatory social criticism. For key to any joke is incongruity; comedians often uncover the contradictions in social life and norms, and audiences laugh at their disclosure. The showing up of social mores as absurd through comedic critique can be used to find that point of liberation, the crack in the accepted view of the world through which the light of truth or freedom shines.

Like jokes, social transformation too proceeds from identifying a contradiction of some sort, an absurdity – something that just doesn't make sense. Comedy often plays in the tension between the symbol and what it refers to – or rather, what the comic and the audience agree about this tension. This makes comedy inherently critical, though not necessarily liberatory. It's a weapon that can be used for progressive or regressive ends. Anti-racism, respect for women's rights and gay rights, for example, can be construed as 'sacred cows' and turned flipside through comedy, as they are in Sam Hyde's performances. When this communality is lost, stand-up comedy has become something else. Audience participation in comedy – the more or less subtle communication between comic and crowd, the ineffable sense of a room's tone – means that the stand-up comedian is never really browbeating or standing apart from them. The comic and the audience are, ultimately, on the same side. Thus comedy scholar John Limon remarks that 'it is hard to fathom how a stand-up performance can be outrageous, that is to say (etymologically) outré, outside the circle. In standup as opposed to all other modes of art and entertainment, there is only the circle.' In stand-up at least, outrageousness and offensiveness actually detract from the work – contra the reactionary theory of comedy, upheld by Yiannopoulos and others, which centres them. ## Stand-up comedians and progressive struggles

Stand-up comedians playing a role in progressive politics is nothing new: Dick Gregory was as much an activist in the civil rights movement as he was a stand-up comic taking on racism in his performance. The UK's alternative comedy scene in the 1980s was explicitly founded as a non-racist, non-sexist and non-homophobic alternative to the comedy mainstream at the time. In fact, politics is rife in stand-up comedy. In the work of Maria Bamford we find a major contemporary example of critical comedy serving emancipatory ends and working on contradictions in creative ways. She transforms difficult experiences into powerful advocacy and social criticism in her comedy, much of which deals with mental health. In her stand-up she explores her struggles with depression, anxiety, bipolar-II and a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder from which she suffers called unwanted thoughts syndrome. Bamford's humour often arises from the

tension between the smiling façade people present to the world and the truth of their inner life. In a bit about how Paula Deen's recipes all read 'like a suicide note', between surreal imitations of Deen's recipes she exclaims 'each day I wake to a fresh nightmare' and 'don't look for me: I've made a plan and I will follow through with it!' The darkness in this material comes through as the human pain that bursts through the cultural norm – the informal proscription on discussing depression.

Bamford destigmatises mental illness and challenges myths surrounding it – often through hilarious vocal imitations of naïve, faux-concerned friends, family members and acquaintances who beset the suffering individual with pressures and misconceptions. She shies away from nothing in this regard, and has audiences laughing from suicide attempt to psych ward.

She also deals with gender pressures in her comedy: 'holding myself to an impossible standard of beauty keeps me from starting a riot!' Making an audience laugh is an experience of power, even if the humour is of a self-deprecating kind. Female success in stand-up has come later than male because audiences have been less disposed to seeing women in power.

But socially critical comedy doesn't always come from a direct experience of marginalisation. Comedians can self-deprecatingly undermine their own position, disclosing social disparities and contradictions by laying bare their privileged social location. Maria Bamford jokes:

> My neighbour is super nice, neighbour Carlos, came over and he said, 'I hope you don't mind living next to a Mexican, "cause we leave shit on our lawn." I said, 'Well, if we're going to talk in stereotypes, I hope you don't mind living next to a white lady – "cause I'm gonna steal that shit. Manifest Destiny, it's kind of already mine."

Stand-up comedy is a medium in which performers frequently put abjection on display, personal as much as social, which means it can show the abject reality of injustice and dispossession which we would rather slough off and ignore.

For Limon, what is stood up in stand-up comedy is the abject. He summarises his book on American comedy thus: 'The one-sentence version of the theory of this book would state the claim that what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection. Stand-up makes vertical (or ventral) what should be horizontal (or dorsal).'

This fear of baring one's abjection to the audience characterises Yiannopoulos' performances and distinguishes them from stand-up comedy proper. Though he proudly displays his homosexual identity as a kind of abjection, this is done in service of reigning social norms. Too afraid to undermine himself, Yiannopoulos is more the 'wit' than the stand-up comic, more in the vein of a Christopher Hitchens or a Stephen Fry. Theweleit characterised the type of the wit thus:

> 'Momentum; verbal machine-gunning, thinking as quick as lightning, sparkling wit, "esprit," brilliant humor. Such skills are often said to be rare among women. True enough perhaps; yet the conclusion should be that what women lack men should equally abandon. The more men's polished words gather momentum, the more they distance themselves from intrusive feelings; they bask in armoured brilliance. More than this, they do violence to anything similar to themselves; they identify their own faults in others with punctilious precision, and mercilessly annihilate them.'

Could this description not apply to the verbal antics of the President?

Trump himself has been likened to a stand-up comedian, though he falls more into this category of the penetrative, violent male wit. Indeed, one of Trump's outrageous 'jokes' that became famous early on in his campaign bears a strong resemblance to the disgust with women's mouths, association of these with vaginas, and images of such mouths dripping with blood or spittle which Theweleit finds in the interwar writings of fascist soldier males. That joke was about the journalist Megyn Kelly:

> 'She gets out and she starts asking me all sorts of ridiculous questions. You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood

coming out of her wherever.

Here women are babbling, physiologically disgusting menstruators. Such a motif accords with a general somatophobia found in fascist texts and which characterises Trump. Trump has a seeming general disgust with the body: he is said to be a germophobe, obsessed with washing his hands, clearly fearing bodily abjection. In many of the fascist writings Theweleit studies in his book *Male Fantasies*, '[t]he mouth appears as a source of nauseating evil. It is "that venomous hole" that spouts out a "rain of spittle." ' If, as Limon contends, stand-up comedy requires a baring of one's own abjection to the audience, it is this that the humour of the 'stand-up comic' Trump is designed, armoured to prevent, here with the body as the sign of it.

But if progressive comics aspire to display some of the world's abjection for the sake of a social critique, they cannot help but be corrupted by that marketized world, often alongside greater success. Bamford routinely expresses a tragic frustration that she's unable to change the world with comedy, and expresses angst about the limitations of the medium. She's also aware of the compromises comics with a message often have to make for the sake of fame and success: > But you know how it goes – you need health benefits so you start working for the man. You know, I was just typing out what he had to say. I felt like I was taking back the night from inside the machine, because it makes a difference to this starfish. And then you get a promotion. And my ego says uh, I wanna be on TV and it turns out the man owns that. He just wants to make you do a couple changes to your jokes so as not to upset his buddies/corporate entities. And I made those changes. And then the man says, "I'll give you a big bag of money if you just say what I want you to say." And I took that big bag of money and I said exactly what he wanted me to say. And now I'm re-decorating my house in shades of grey! ## Dave Chappelle and the ambiguities of Comedy Success At the height of comic superstardom, Dave Chappelle has seen these problems first hand. Echoing Bamford's concerns about 'the Man', Chappelle expresses a frustration with the ethical and political compromises big-name comics are some-

times pressured to make:

> Maybe corporate America fucks with human beings like they're products and investments. Maybe a motherfucker brings you into a room and says, "this 50 million dollars, this pile of money, it's all for you" – and when you try to grab it he just throws his dick right on top of it.

Chappelle's huge success has come with drawbacks. Not only have executives interfered with his work, but audiences have misinterpreted it. In 2004, at the height of his fame, he walked away from his hit TV sketch show on Comedy Central, leaving behind a $50m deal. He had experienced a white crew member laughing uproariously at an act in which Chappelle put on blackface. Reflecting on the matter, the comedian said that

> I was doing sketches that were funny but socially irresponsible. I felt like I was deliberately being encouraged and I was overwhelmed. It's like you are cluttered with things and you don't pay attention to things like your ethics.

Thus Chappelle ran into the phenomenon of failed irony – a sketch which he had intended as a mockery of racist stereotypes was received as a hilarious confirmation of them. Jokes are co-created by audience and comic not only with regards to whether they're funny or not; audiences also determine what jokes *mean*. The larger and more diverse the audience, the more opportunities there are to be misread.

In his stand-up, Chappelle frequently digs into the subject of racism and racist police violence. He also uses his comedy to de-mythologise American sacred cows. In his special *For What It's Worth* he discusses the removal of the image of Saddam Hussein from Iraqi currency during the US occupation. He describes the image of the dictator as a 'subtle psychological nuance of oppression' but then asks 'what about our money? Our money looks like baseball cards with slave-owners on 'em.' Chappelle's seemingly effortless likeability and his profi-

ciency in dirty jokes and weed humour allow him to masterfully smuggle social critique into his stand-up. The title of his 2000 comedy special *Killin' Em Softly* indicates something of Chappelle's method: social commentary cuts deep but is surreptitiously and smoothly delivered.

Yet Chappelle has recently been celebrated by some on the right for a set in which he reportedly took aim at gay rights, women's rights and transgender people, even seemingly defending Trump against sexual assault allegations. Chappelle's work has an ambiguity that permits it to be appropriated by different sections of the political spectrum at different times. Some of what Chappelle says is progressive and some of it regressive. Other parts invite multiple readings. It's often unclear what his exact socio-political motivation is, and in part this ambiguity helps to maintain his popularity with a racially diverse American audience.

Even so, Chappelle paid the price. He saw his work tampered with. In an interview with James Lipton he recounts a sketch he had shot, about his being booed off at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, causing scepticism among white television executives because there weren't any white people in it. Chappelle has called his own career a 'parable'; indeed, it provides useful lessons on the possibilities and limits of mass-market comedy as a vehicle for social critique.

This ambiguity is perhaps innate to the form: political speech and stand-up comedy are, of course, not identical, and while comedy *can* be a means of emancipatory social criticism, stand-up comedians cannot replace public intellectuals, nor should they. On the other hand, the lack of a direct correspondence between comedy and political propaganda should not lead to our imagining they are utterly distinct, any more than would be the case with regards to any other art form – should not, in other words, lead to a nihilism. A nihilism is proclaimed by the reactionary theory of comedy as a space in which 'anything goes', but this is perfectly hypocritical, since fascist humour is in fact not valueless but full of value: Sam Hyde's work operates more like direct political speech much of the time, rather than possessing anything like the self-undermining, abjecting quality to stand-up. Here the feint of nihilism is simply a cover for far-right propaganda.

And whilst comedy is always comedy and can never replace socio-political critique proper, we must be attentive to the ways in which joking which raises critical questions about society and even attacks its injustices can, nonetheless, through the cathartic release of laughter in the audience, leave the latter well-adjusted to iniquity rather than mobilised to do anything in particular about it. We must be careful not to confuse the mere allusion to social problems in humour as a sufficient comedic critique and intervention. In this connection, comedy scholar Rebecca Krefting's concept of 'charged humor', which names a form of stand-up that motivates action and builds community amongst the marginalised, 'comedy that aims to create community using shared experiences of occlusion, misrepresentation, stigmatization and oppression as the basis for identification', is useful. Krefting cites Maria Bamford, and others such as Hari Kondabolu and George Lopez, as examples of charged comics.

Arguably the process of audience and performer co-creating the joke in the stand-up comedy environment, discussed above, has taken a new turn with the advent of the internet. As the internet increasingly dominates and determines other media, audiences fragment. These fragmented audiences take different bits from a comedy special, different aspects of a comic's persona, and use these to celebrate or denounce the performer and their work. Although this constitutes a more recent phenomenon, stand-up comedy especially conduces to this process of cutting up, this selecting of aspects of an author's work for praise or critique, given that the form generally consists in short bursts (jokes) rather than great arcs or storylines. Co-creation of the joke has thus taken on a new form: the audience is empowered to disseminate critique, relatively freed from the mediation of TV executives and advertisers, in a manner suited to their own ends. The audience now not only co-creates the joke through their laughter (or absence of, or outrage) but now possesses the tools to edit and distribute it. This remixing of stand-up, a production in use by the consumer, extends and complexifies what already happens in stand-up comedy; it provides new means for propaganda. These are means the left should grasp, since the right are already doing so. The left should find creative ways to mobilise comedy in a variety of fora, to rally and

to use this art as a means of finding liberation and of healing patriarchal and capitalist damage. Comedy can and should be part of creating new ways of feeling for a socialist future.

2

How Sex Scenes are the Mirrors into the Dark Soul of the Film Industry

by Antonia Louisa Georgiou

When we watch films as a form of entertainment, we rarely consider that the violence we witness on screen could reflect a harrowing off-screen reality. Writing in *The Guardian* last week, French actor Léa Seydoux revealed that she was one of the many victims of Harvey Weinstein's unwanted advances. But Seydoux's article reminds us that the subjugation of women in the film industry is not confined to what goes on behind the screen: she also mentions two other instances of exploitation at the hands of men in the film industry. In the first, she recalls a director, whom she "really liked and respected", telling her "I wish I could fuck you". In the second, she denounces a director who filmed long sex scenes which lasted for days, bordering on the torturous. Whoever the man in question may be, Seydoux had previously criticised her *Blue is the Warmest Colour* director Abdellatif Kechiche at the film's initial release in 2013. Describing a "horrible"

filmmaking experience in which filming sex scenes lasted for ten days, Seydoux said that Kechiche made her feel like a “prostitute”.

As we lament the insidious aggression committed by men like Weinstein, we must also acknowledge that much of it occurs before our very eyes. Exploitation on screen reflects the exploitation and coercion that occurs off-screen. The ways in which the industry demeans women do not begin and end with the horrors of the casting couch. Misogyny manifests in infinite subtle ways, all of which usually go unrecognised by the average viewer. In an industry where men claim ownership of women’s bodies, it is through sex scenes that directors can wield their power and sense of entitlement. Take *Blue is the Warmest Colour*. It’s interesting that much of the criticism directed at the film’s sex scenes were centred on the positions of sex. For the heteronormative, it is comical to imagine lesbian sex in any way other than “woman goes down on woman”. But the positions are not the issue, and are in fact the sole positive aspect of these scenes (yes, there are different ways for lesbians to have sex). The problem is with the phallocentric lens of scopophilia through which the sex is depicted. Scopophilia is the act of deriving pleasure from observing people in sexual or nude (essentially vulnerable and exposed) states, which in turn leads to the observer having mastery over the object of the gaze.

When Kechiche films the actors having sex in *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, he is affirming his male domination over them. The camera lingers over the actors’ writhing curves, bodies without faces, synthetic sweat strategically placed to enhance the stylistic pornification. Rarely do we see the women’s reactions to what is happening to their bodies: occasionally we get a glimpse of their faces, lasting mere seconds before the camera returns to where Kechiche wants it to be – to the sum of their parts. As voyeurs, we must behold the object of the male gaze. The female protagonists are not allowed to reciprocate the gaze, which is exclusively male. When a woman becomes an object, and not a subject, she cannot reciprocate. The viewer is implicated in the gaze, complicit in the protagonists’ discomfort. Accordingly, female viewers must engage with the film as if they were

men. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey explains that "the man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle."

In retaliation to her criticism of the sex scenes, Kechiche branded Léa Seydoux an "arrogant, spoiled child". The intention of Kechiche's response is to make Seydoux feel powerless – not just through exploitative sex scenes, but through demeaning paternalistic language that reduces her concerns to nothing more than the utterances of a spoilt child ("spoilt" implying that she doesn't realise how lucky she is to have been humiliated and exploited). Having also watched Kechiche's 2007 film *The Secret of the Grain* (also known as *Couscous*), it is evident that he has a penchant for filming the sexual humiliation of women. A mere three minutes into the film, a man pulls up a woman's dress, exposes her buttocks, and repeatedly spanks her in an aggressive manner, a scene which serves the narrative in no conceivable way. Far too many male film directors use coercive methods to push women into doing things that make them feel uncomfortable under the guise of "art".

In a phallocentric industry, there is no place for female pleasure. Capitalistic modes of mainstream film production mean that the female body is a commodity used to propagate misogynistic fantasies. The "female pleasure" we witness on screen is not the pleasure of women, but the pleasure of men in observing women. By contrast, when Lana (Chloë Sevigny) and Brandon (Hilary Swank) have their first sexual encounter in the Kimberley Pierce-directed *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), there are no titillating shots of sweaty, writhing limbs or lacy underwear sliding down perfectly tanned legs; rather, the camera is fixated on Lana's face, growing increasingly ecstatic, as Brandon brings her to orgasm. Pierce feels through herself and projects it onto her female subject: by putting women behind the camera, it enables the representation of female pleasure in ways that are not mediated through the male gaze.

For male film makers, psychologically penetrating the mind and will of a woman is yet another form of violation. In the notorious 1959 film *Peeping Tom*, the camera is depicted as a symbolic extension of the phallus whose ultimate goal is to destroy its female objects. This shows how the male gaze is an inherently violent one, as scopophilic exploitation not only robs women of their sexual identity, but of their humanity. After so much exploitation and abuse, women need to take back power and reclaim their bodies. Recently, film director Sarah Polley, herself once the object of Weinstein's lewd advances, explained how being a woman behind the camera meant she could film women without reducing them to sexual objects: "I could decide what I felt was important to say, how to film a woman, without her sexuality being a central focus without context." Polley's working conditions are the way forward: a symbiotic relationship whereby both actor and director can feel empowered, working towards the shared goal of completing the film. Film making should not be a dichotomy of masculine vs feminine power play, of male activity vs female inactivity. With more women opening up about abuses of power and rejecting the conditions they have had to endure in the past, they can make exploitation both on and off screen a relic of patriarchal domination. It is every actor's right to be treated with dignity and respect, as opposed to being reduced to slabs of meat solely for the male gaze.

3

The Inevitability of the Gig Economy

by Wendy Liu

The gig economy may finally be souring in the eyes of the public. No longer widely heralded as the pinnacle of ingenuity and customer convenience, companies like Uber and Deliveroo are facing increasingly negative press coverage of their exploitative business model. Even the innovative merits of the gig economy are being challenged by no less than the Financial Times, in a surprisingly radical op-ed questioning the narrative that the gig economy is the inevitable result of technological change, and asking whether broader economic factors also played a role.

What the Financial Times article misses, however, is the opportunity to name the culprit, and thus the entire teleological aspect of the gig economy. It's true that its rise is not simply the inevitable result of technological change. But the economic factors that played a role aren't merely a coincidence, either. It would be more accurate to say that the gig economy is the inevitable result of technological change *under neoliberalism*.

Neoliberalism and the Shape of the Internet Revolution

To truly understand the gig economy, you have to examine how its ascendance was shaped by the recent evolution of capitalism. You have to untangle the neoliberal knot to find the three main threads that, when paired with technological innovation, explain the gig economy's rise: the role of ideology; the recent excess of capital; and the ongoing decline in the power of labour. It's the confluence of all these factors that laid the foundations for the gig economy.

The first thread relates to the main ideological underpinnings of the technology startup world. As Moira Weigel writes in The Guardian, the primary strain of thought in the industry pairs personal liberty with a pro-market stance, in an outright celebration of capitalist credo even while other industries might try to downplay its influence. In this world, wealth is a wonderful thing that doesn't need to be justified, and economic inequality is a celebrated consequence of the disruption unleashed by startups. For the individual entrepreneur, it's all about using the market to achieve personal glory—to be called the next Zuckerberg and get your face on the cover of Time—and that's sublimated into an almost religious pursuit of growth. Not personal growth, but growth via the cybernetic extension of you that is your startup. Parasitic, unstoppable growth. Skirt regulations, "hack the system", sacrifice your personal health; whatever it takes until your startup blankets the world.

The second thread is a consequence of easy monetary policy after the financial crisis, when federally-mandated low interest rates resulted in an excess of capital seeking out increasingly scarce avenues for profitable investment. Nick Srnicek calls this asset-based Keynesianism, and the consequence is overaccumulation—too much capital chasing high returns at a time of general stagnation. *Venture* capital is the most demanding form that this capital takes, because their investments are intentionally high-risk; as 3 of every 4 startups

are expected to fail, the remaining ones have to return enough to make up for the rest. Which means there's no point in investing in companies that promise only modest returns over a long period of time. Instead, the prevailing mentality is more go-big-or-go-home - unless your startup has the possibility of becoming absolutely massive in a short period of time, you'll have a hard time convincing early-stage investors to give you their money.

On the other hand, once your business model has received venture capital's stamp of approval, raising more money becomes fairly straightforward. This is how Uber managed to raise $15 billion at a valuation of $68 billion, despite massive losses: if you have monopolistic ambitions and a technology-fuelled growth trajectory, a lot can be forgiven. Technology has become a sort of collective dream, in which investors' boundless optimism for the promise of "innovation" becomes a belief that the industry can absorb unlimited amounts of surplus capital. If you think this sounds eerily reminiscent of the conditions that produced the dot-com bubble, you're not alone — though, of course, some venture capitalists have a vested interest in declaring otherwise.

The last thread is the weakening influence of labour under neoliberalism, most notably in the US under Reagan and in the UK under Thatcher. The short story is: after a period of economic prosperity in many developed countries post-WWII, growth began to falter; in the consequent struggle over how to distribute diminishing profits, capital won, resulting in the balance of power shifting away from labour. In the last few decades, we've seen the decline of union power, the rollback of market-impeding regulations, and the cutting of public services. Added to this dangerous mix we have the fallout of the financial crisis, which left most of the advanced economies with high un- and underemployment, not to mention millions of people underwater on their mortgages. Combined with the austerity-driven hollowing out of the welfare state, the outcome is increased precarity as more and more people have no option but to find paid employment in order to survive.

Together, these threads form the socioeconomic landscape onto which the inven-

tion of the smartphone emerged. And so the perfect storm of economic factors combines with technological change: the technology entrepreneurs, who have no problem skirting regulations in the pursuit of growth, and flush with cash from approving venture capitalists, see an opportunity to profit from the smartphone proliferation among all this idle labour. Of course, that's probably not how they think of it. For them, it's merely a technical solution to a personal problem: making it easier to order food, or get a ride to the airport, or get their clothes washed. The existence of a class of people who are willing to be on the *other* side of those transactions—to run errands for a stranger in exchange for a small amount of money—is taken for granted. They assume that there exists a smartphone-equipped reserve army of labour, people who are just waiting for a push notification before they spring into action, ready to take on any job no matter how poorly paid or stultifying.

And they were *right*. That army did exist, and still does. It is on the back of their efforts and the assumption of their continued existence that gig economy companies have been able to climb to such vertiginous valuations.

Monopolised Capital - Precarious Labour

In a way, then, the real innovation behind the gig economy—the real reason behind it economic inevitability—isn't primarily technical. It's in the way technological change interacts with labour, giving rise to a new type of corporation. In Platform Capitalism, the major companies behind the gig economy are referred to as "lean platforms", characterised by a business model that involves owning as few physical assets as possible; instead, the focus is on software assets, which are key to high potential profit margins and growth rates. Labour that doesn't directly add to intellectual property creation is abstracted away, as these companies attempt to import the software industry's monopoly-driven tendencies into the untapped market of the real world. This is how these companies were able to scale so quickly—no corporation that depends on the long-term development

of physical assets can scale as quickly as Uber (founded 2009) or Deliveroo (founded 2013). Thus this business model has an almost evolutionary advantage, in that corporations that adopt this model will either out-scale their competitors or die trying. This is the sort of thing that gets venture capitalists really excited, and so they're happy to subsidise operations (at least for a few years) while the kinks are sorted out.

Of course, the real world is a lot messier than the digital world; information may be infinitely and instantly replicable, but most physical goods are surely not. Still, you can approximate the efficiency of the digital by taking a lean platform approach. For taxis: don't own cars or employ drivers, just convince people who already own cars to drive others around and give you a cut of whatever they make. For cleaning houses: don't hire cleaners or even buy cleaning supplies, just be the platform that connects customers with cleaners who desperately need work. For food delivery: don't employ the couriers, and certainly don't own the *restaurants*, just get cash-strapped cyclists to speed anxiously between restaurant and customer, knowing that their livelihood depends on the pizza still being warm when it arrives. Despite the pretense that workers benefit from the flexibility these jobs offer, the gig economy is really little more than the high-tech version of the historical 'day labourer' market—combining corporations' drive for cheap and plentiful labour with technological innovations that enable it.

Thus the lean platform approach is the ultimate startup fantasy. The strategy is to eliminate any corporeal assets that might slow growth, in order to become an assetless behemoth that manages to skim off the top of every transaction. Anything that is not crucial to producing the intellectual property (branding, software, data) of these companies should be shed, because digital assets are scalable and can be reproduced at zero marginal cost while physical assets are not. The actual human beings who drive the cars or deliver the food or clean the houses are the least desirable assets of all, saddling the corporation with baggage that could impede growth: pensions, healthcare, regular wages even if there's no demand for their services. In an ideal world, these corporations would not have to

rely on human workers at all; instead they'd simply own the software for powering self-flying drones and self-driving cars. Software can't complain about low wages, or unionise, or file worker protections lawsuits that force startups to shut down. Workers, however, can: they're organising, and raising awareness, and starting to turn the tide of public opinion against the corporations.

None of which is anything new, of course. This is the same sort of class struggle that we've seen throughout history, and as with every previous attempt by an exploited class to demand better treatment, gig economy workers are meeting fierce resistance from their oppressors, who justify their exploitation by framing it in terms of innovation and growth. After all, better worker protections don't mesh with a growth-oriented lean business model; preferably, there would be a stream of on-demand contractors who are willing to do the most menial of tasks in exchange for subsistence-level income. The goal is to shift the burden of the reproduction of labour away from the employer, leaving someone else—the state, the worker's family, charities, who cares—to pick up the slack. In a very visceral way, these corporations are attempting to subvert the unwritten contract that previous generations have expected: by exposing their workers to the vicissitudes of the market, they abdicate their expected responsibility to provide for them *while still making money off their work*.

We Only Want the Earth

To defenders of the gig economy, the recent backlash seems ridiculous. In their view, workers should be grateful that these apps provide them with any work at all, which they otherwise wouldn't have access to. Why on earth would workers complain about having something rather than nothing? Surely it's better than the initial, pre-gig economy starting conditions of un- and underemployment.

But that's a false dichotomy that speaks to a failure of imagination. We don't necessarily need to return to the initial starting conditions. We can be much

more ambitious than that: we can imagine an entirely different world, one that requires a fundamental rethinking of the current economic system. We should ask ourselves if our economic optimization function has trapped us in a local maximum—a suboptimal situation that can't be ameliorated by moving forward or backward—and if we need to take a stochastic leap of faith into the unknown in search of something better. The corporations who are succeeding in this new economy may not be *responsible* for the situation we're in, but if we let them continue operating untrammeled, we may never get out of it.

Maybe it's time we go back to first principles. What do we actually want? What is the goal we want our economic system to achieve? What sort of society do we want to build, and how is it different from the society we have now? We have to hold on to that vision to figure out how to get there. We have to remember that before anything else, we are human beings living in a society of other human beings and that everything we've constructed is just artifice on top of that.

These companies and the people who work for them, did not personally create the conditions of precarity that allowed them to accumulate power and profit on an enormous scale. They are not to blame for these preconditions. But if we ever want to *transcend* these preconditions, we'll have to halt their pursuit of never ending growth.

In the short term, this will mean using regulatory channels to improve employment conditions for workers. There has been some success so far, but it's still quite limited: Uber may have lost their appeal to classify drivers as self-employed, but there is no guarantee that this ruling will be enforced in a speedy manner, especially since Uber plans to appeal the ruling (again); on the flip side, Deliveroo actually won their own legal battle over workers' rights. Alternatively, launching a competing worker-owned app may be another way of protecting workers' rights.

In the long term, though, we'll have to do more than change a few regulations and start some new co-ops. Ultimately, the real societal threat these companies pose isn't limited to the confines of the gig economy—it's *everywhere*, anywhere

there is low-paid work in substandard conditions. The gig economy is just the latest means of using technology to get precarious workers to sacrifice their time in the service of capital. As long as we accept disempowerment of workers in the name of greater efficiency, as long as we prioritise the rights of individual corporations to gain market share over our collective rights as people, then the underlying conditions will stay the same, and the exploitation epitomised by the gig economy will not go away.

In the end, if we really want to confront the gig economy, we can't narrow our focus to the convenient villains provided by the Ubers and Deliveroos of the world. Taking down the current crop of corporations will not solve the larger structural factors that allowed them to scale so quickly in the first place. To truly combat the gig economy, we'll have to combat neoliberalism. We'll need to fight for decommodification, and demand better public services, and challenge the intellectual hegemony of the free market. We'll need to be bold enough to imagine a better world: a world where economic gains are shared equally, and where technology is used not to divide and control us but instead to truly *liberate* us. A world, in short, where there is no more gig economy.

4

Barely managing: on what's missing from left political economy

by Sahil Dutta and Paul Gilbert

There's a difference between policies and power. If a left-wing party wants to turn its manifesto promises into political practice it needs to construct the capacity to do so. The gap between a minister's policy aspiration and the lived reality of a worker or service user is vast, and composed of a chain of different institutions, expertise and personnel. This gap corrupts the democratic ideal that elected politicians make policies, while civil servants merely carry them out.

Connecting these disparate parts of the British state are not the Machiavellian scheming of Yes Minster bureaucrats. Instead, it's the managerial reforms that sought to rationalise the state bureaucracy that must be challenged. It's here, in what Christopher Hood called the tools of New Public Management (NPM), that neoliberalism is deeply encoded. These techniques, used to design, cost and evaluate state action are so embedded in state administration, that it's per-

haps no surprise that the Labour Party's own briefing on 'Alternative Models of Ownership' says so little about alternative, democratic forms of management. While it (rightly) highlights the importance of 'democratising' ownership, it depicts management as a simple corollary of ownership. Here, the very real ills which beset privatised services and infrastructure are simply laid at the door of privatisation. But reversing decades of privatisation will not produce the return of a mythic "public service ethos". Reforming ownership is not enough, for a Left political economy to succeed, managerialism must matter too. Reform of the state's managerial tools would mount not only a direct challenge to the status quo, but also to the inheritance of New Labour. The last Labour government did not substantially transform inequities of power in the private economy. Its most significant legacy was instead a restless innovation in public governance that saw quangos, consultants and managerial specialists become ever more central to the design and delivery of the public sector. In doing so New Labour ramped up a trend for centralising state control that began with Edward Heath and grew under Margaret Thatcher. The success of the New Right assault on the collective sectors during the 1980s, that is now often associated with fiscal retrenchment, depended, in fact, on government constructing the capacity to force through its changes at an administrative level. Thatcher's government especially worked on substituting the autonomy of professions whose authority and expertise could resist their programme of change - teachers, doctors, civil servants, social workers, local government - for control at a distance by a thickened clot of managers. As Michael Heseltine, then secretary of state for the environment, put it a year after Thatcher took power: "The management ethos must run right through our national life - private and public companies, civil service, nationalised industries, local government, the National Health Service". But Thatcher didn't simply oversee the development of an increasingly centrally managed state. The specific techniques that made this 'neoliberal' revolution possible matter. And key to this struggle was the development of NPM: a regime of governance where private sector values of efficiency and cost-saving are forced into public sector organisations. Its advocates hoped that by driving 'private sector values' into the public

sector, NPM would ramp up efficiency. Critics warned that valorising efficiency was nothing more than a pseudo-intellectual justification for cutting costs, and would inevitably mean slashing the crucial services that many relied on. In the end, NPM delivered the worst of both: More cuts and higher costs. Years of successive reforms saw public sector costs spiral. State spending on quangos quadrupled from 1980-2010 to over £40 billion in real terms. This was part of a trend that saw the administrative costs of UK civil departments rise by 50% over Thatcher's time in office and substantially again under Blair. By 2010, the administrative cost of running the British state neared £30 billion a year (excluding military spending), proof that whatever the supporters promised and critics feared, NPM did the very opposite of 'slashing the state'. But straightforwardly criticising NPM for failing to deliver on its promise of 'a government that works better and costs less', risks overlooking a more significant legacy: the transformation of the exercise of political economic power in the public sector. In academies and free schools, foundation trust hospitals, outsourced services, quango-run utilities, or the flourishing of targets and audit culture, NPM has transformed government. Put simply, the managerial state now lacks the capacity to democratically run public services, even the ones it owns. To be clear, we're not suggesting that vital public services and infrastructure should be privately owned. The manifesto proposals to bring private rail companies back into public ownership, and replace our 'dysfunctional' water system with a network of regionally-owned water companies are well made. These utilities 'taken out of democratic control' through privatisation have cost members of the public – and the state – more, while rewarding private owners handsomely. In these cases, ownership itself (and the compulsion to appease rapacious shareholders) is a key problem to which Labour needs to provide a solution. Similarly, there is no doubt that any hope of a rebalanced political economy needs greater infrastructure investment. But re-nationalisation of – or increased public investment in – infrastructure is only the beginning, and privileging ownership reforms as a way out of neoliberalism is not enough to challenge entrenched NPM techniques. How should the corrosive effects of NPM be tackled then? In identifying private market rela-

tions as the core of a regressive political economy, critics of NPM see a solution in either rejecting the private sector "ethos" or injecting "democratic principles" into the organisation of the public sector. But viewing headteachers, chief executives and vice-chancellors as if they dreamed of one-day realising large executive compensation packages linked to the 'share value' of their virtual corporations is itself misleading. Leaving aside the constant increase in private concessions and subcontractors across the public sector, this is not the case. There are no shareholders, no dividends, no impatient financiers demanding short-term gains to their 'shareholder value'. Managers in public services do not manage 'as if' their institutions were private, shareholder-owned entities merely because some agents of the state want to privatise them. It is not the supposed 'market principles' that make tools of NPM damaging for a Left political economy, it is the tools themselves. Critics too easily collapse these into the triumph of so-called free-market fundamentalism associated with Hayek and Friedman. Yet the focus on targets, cost-benefit analysis, outsourcing and audit culture stems from a very different intellectual lineage to that of neoliberal theory. It is the RAND institute and the likes of Robert McNamara and Alain Enthoven who have been central to the development of contemporary public sector managerial knowledge, not the Mont Pelerin Society. In contemporary Britain, the reproduction of NPM has become an end in itself in the public sector. Consider the list of training courses recently made available to senior academics and professional services staff at a large, research-intensive university in the Midlands: 'Essential guide to managing at the university'; 'Management communication'; 'Management for efficiency and effectiveness'; 'Managing performance'; 'Managing projects in the organisation'; and the malignantly tautological 'Understanding the management role to improve management performance.' The entrenchment of a well-remunerated cadre empowered to manage – to evaluate, compensate and castigate performance according to a set of quantified criteria – becomes a self-referential and recursive process. As the organisational reforms fail to bring about the promised efficiency gains, managers (supported by highly-paid consultants) introduce further change, utilising an expanded set of increasingly tendentious quantifications in order to

asymptotically capture organisational processes and roles. And then, more often than not, they move on, to 'manage change' elsewhere. As Will Davies has noted, in contrast to the Left's concerted push for new approaches to economics, there has been a frustrating silence to date around the possibility of new Left approaches to management. The best of the current academic works are rightly critical, berating managers for excluding slaveholding, colonial expansion and other forms of 'necrocapitalism' from conventional histories of management. There are also numerous Foucauldian warnings about the dangers of 'governing by numbers', but this is not enough. Similarly, the ambition of Left management must become something richer than prioritising stakeholder voice or labour representation on corporate boards. The challenge is to develop alternative techniques that allow for democratic accountability of public service professionals in such a way that prevents empowering distant technocrats as the ultimate arbiters of correct practice. This is no call to simply turn NPM red. Current managerial techniques have a neoliberal trajectory inscribed in their history. Instead workers could take the lead challenging existing frameworks of accountability in their sectors. What is to stop nurses themselves partnering with Unison to create a fairer system of appraisal of their expertise for example? A return to the pre-NPM autonomy of civil servants and the professions is neither viable nor particularly desirable, given the class politics from which professional autonomy once drew its legitimacy. Moreover, in a left political economy organised around democratic ownership, there will still be management failure. No perfect 'process' can ever be developed to deliver perfect outcomes. Yet change remains necessary and neither a continuation of NPM nor an 'anti-neoliberal ethos' will suffice.

5

Reclaiming Common Sense

by James Trafford

Arguably, we are at a critical sociohistorical juncture. The neoliberal conjugation of progressive liberalism with marketization is giving way to mutations that include both new forms of ethnonationalism, and new forms of socialism. Here, common sense has emerged as a central site of political contention and antagonism, with attempts to shut-down political possibility with "magic money trees" giving way to majority support to requisition local housing for victims of the Grenfell Tower atrocity, and Clive Lewis proclaiming that we should "burn neoliberalism, not people". In an era that has often been characterized by the most hegemonic forms of neoliberal common sense in the sociopolitical formation governed by perpetual austerity, it seems that the ground is finally beginning to shift.

Of course, recent political and media responses to these shifts have largely operated as consensus defence mechanisms. Here, we witness still the upholding of neoliberal common sense that "austerity is not a political choice, but a financial necessity" against Jeremy Corbyn's arguments to the contrary [1]. And, expressions of popular democracy are doubly reprimanded – on the one hand

[1] Martin Daubney on Sky Sunrise, 28th June 2017 at 8.40am.

for their supposed xenophobia and ethnonationalism – and for their utopian socialist imagination on the other. The sneering dismissal of the "racist working classes", for example, enables us to see the ways in which political possibility is defined by what is taken to be empirical, or acceptable, whilst also employing sanctioning practices that aim to further embed and entrench that acceptability. The scope of the domain of the empirical, here, is typically limited to so-called moderate and centre viewpoints, which supposedly result from non-partisan and non-ideological managerial and pacificatory consensus, as determining the *reality* of both neoliberal socioeconomic formations, and political practice itself (as discussed by Williams). But, the increasingly obvious failure of this common sense over recent months is indicative of both the lie in which neoliberal centrism pretends to consensus and neutrality, and the reality of the massive-scale engineering project that it has required to maintain its hegemonic status through New Labourism to Austerity-Toryism and beyond.

Common Sense Neoliberalism

In *Common Sense Neoliberalism*, Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea discuss the ways in which media appeals to common sense are employed as a legitimation strategy that secures political standpoints [2]. As they point out, the invocation of common sense is not simply an attempt to excavate popular opinion, but rather it also hopes to shape that opinion through the presumption that it is already shared. It is in this domain of common sense, therefore, that central political battles are to be fought. There are at least two dimensions to the way we can understand common sense in this context: the first being found "in the wild" so to speak, and the second, the discursively construed (and often constructed) mediatised appeals to common sense. It would be simple to think that it is a fissure between the two that has opened-up over recent months, where the political commentariat is simply out of touch with "real" common sense. But this would fail to grasp the

[2] Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea (2013). "Common-sense neoliberalism". *Soundings* 55: Values as commodities.

mechanisms by which common sense operates, particularly regarding the way in which both forms are shaped by power, and potentially leads to the reified abuse of opinion polls, and the dangerous idea that a "new common sense" has already been reached.

As such, accounting for common sense is somewhat tricky, since its sedimentation and construction occurs at the level, not of discursive rules, but of assumptions, habits, and dispositions. Commonsense is not the sort of thing that can be discursively elaborated, being composed of attitudes that are open-ended, differential responses to each other and to contexts, emotions, and embodied actions. But, since this social background of norms shapes the meanings within which our lives are formed, it is also the central site in which our local interactions and contexts are tied to broader structures, practices, and sanctions. So, whilst neoliberal commonsense is *deployed* as a set of social constraints and configurations as if they are simply factual, it is more typically ingrained as sets of material practices. As Wendy Brown argues, with the neoliberal rise of competitive individualism, inequality becomes the norm, where we are at ongoing risk of failure, redundancy, and precarity, even concerning basic needs of food and shelter, whilst often not questioning our individual responsibility for these inequalities [3]. In this context, common sense neoliberalism is often not visible at the level of discourse, but is grasped through its material and normative effects, many of which operate in the register of affect, mental health, and a permanent state of anxiety [4]. As Ellie Mae O'Hagan put it, after speaking with employees of a recently bought-out carpet factory in Blackpool, "not one has said neoliberalism but that's the system they're describing and they know full well what it is because they're living it" [5].

It is on this terrain in which common sense is continuously formed and reformed, as part-and-parcel with the material and embodied practices of our lives, where

[3] Wendy Brown (2015). *Undoing the Demos*. MIT Press.

[4] See Mark Fisher's excellent discussion of these effects in e.g. his (2009), *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?*. Zero Books.

[5] @MissEllieMae, July 21st (2017), 5.06am.

these are sculpted by the specific socioeconomic conditions in which we are inextricably located. It is also for this reason that common sense can neither be disparaged as misguided or intrinsically conservative, nor can it be upheld as a single monolithic and static "reality" outside of the conditions of power in which it is sculpted.

Neoliberalism, on this sort of story, cannot be adequately approached as if imposed as an ideological set of principles, but neither can it be fully captured in its objective and infrastructural forms – it is neither merely discursive nor merely material-determinative. Rather, the power of neoliberalism is that it is a massive-scale, and complex, engineering project, which has required multiple mutations over time, and constant reinforcement at all levels – from common sense to economic policy; from higher-education timetabling systems to detention-centres. This is largely not the result of an imposed, and top-down strategy, but rather of the constitution of a landscape of objective conditions in which the various incarnations of neoliberalism become more possible than others [6]. In this way, this hegemonic neoliberalism has made and remade institutions and human subjects. Moreover, whilst coercion has been necessary, such as the carceral state in the UK and US, military intervention across the Middle East, confrontations between government and trade unions, and between police and protest movements and "riots"; on the whole, forceful sanctions are at the periphery of a largely coherent hegemonic project across social, political, economic, and cultural domains. Neoliberalism, then, in its current form captures a loose, complex set of mechanisms, practices, and norms, combining centrist governance with neoliberal managerialism and occluded state intervention in forging competition, which, taken together, would likely be disavowed by many of those espousing some of the norms upholding it.

So, neoliberal centrism can be understood to operate through forms of capillary power, as Foucault put it [7], which doesn't require our assent, but is better

[6] See Alex Williams (2015), "Complexity & Hegemony: Technical Politics in an Age of Uncertainty." University of East London. http://roar.uel.ac.uk/4773/.

[7] Michel Foucault (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Pantheon.

considered in terms of the ways in which material and normative practices are shaped by a landscape of power that "consists in guiding the possibility of conduct" [8]. Where neoliberal centrism emphasises consensus and equilibrium, the resultant entrenching of a local set of norms as setting the horizon for political discourse is always the result of complex processes producing relatively stable social forms through mostly harmonious interaction and conglomerate pressure. As such, it is necessary to consider the complex, and often non-discursive, ways in which commonsense is shaped, mobilized, and revised by considering the intersections of material and technical systems with social norms. For example, explicit *appeals* to common sense, to "hard-working families" or austerity as "tightening our belts" can be understood as part of more general frameworks of political articulation and power, which attempt to engineer our social norms and dispositions by imposing pressure to act along certain trajectories, and actualizing tendencies towards conservative social positions – in this sense, discourse has complex causal powers.

These sorts of appeals use explicit discourse to shape and embed the stability of social norms in the form of common sense, and thereby to sculpt the material practices and institutional forms in which it is expressed. In other words, our interests and meanings are never just "found" in common sense, as if making an invisible ideology visible, but neither are they simply imposed upon it. Rather, the consolidation of a specific alignment of interests from what is a loose and complex dispositional field, often involves the active reconstruction of those interests at the level of political discourse. Think of the processes by which, for example, the "benefit cheat" becomes seen as the enemy of the "hardworking family", through the articulation of stereotypes across varying media, political articulation of our interests along this axis, and so on. Appeals to common sense are part of much wider processes requiring already entrenched meanings regarding, in this case, individual competitiveness, work, gender, and nationhood. These interests are then used to underpin substantial socio-political and material effects, looped into institutions and practices that serve to enact and enforce policy decisions, which

[8] Michel Foucault (1982). "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8 (4): 777–795, p.789.

then feed-back into media to further embed those social norms as if reality.

Reclaiming Common Sense; Resculpting Power

It is unsurprising, in this context, to find that there have been substantive attempts to maintain these systems of power (often by progressive liberals) in recent calls for the re-education of the young, in drawing attention to the supposed stupidity of the "common people", and the mass moral condemnation of the supposedly racist working classes. There, the suggestion is that the people may not know what is best for them, and that governance requires institutionalized forms of rational expertise to ward off the "irrational crowd". As such, the current crisis of common sense is understood as a problem of irrationality that can be put down to the simplistic viewpoints of those rooted in specific contexts that are incapable of gaining traction upon the complexity of neoliberal economics, society, and political decisions. It is of absolute import, that a left approach to common sense does not operate along similar lines, adopting (as it often has) a paternalistic advocation of "good sense" in critique of a duped working class. But, paradoxically perhaps, this sort of left paternalism exists alongside a tendency on the left to avoid looking like we are engaged in anything that could appear to be the manipulation of common sense. It is equally important that we do not shy away from the necessity to actively re-engineer common sense, to forge progressive practices, and to shift the current balance of power.

In distinction to these prior tendencies on the left, it seems that the conditions of the possibility for building new common senses cannot be rooted in ideology critique, or leftist intellectualism. Rather, they must be rooted in an experience of the effects and consequences of neoliberalism as a state of affairs, and material practices – in objective imbalances of power across the social landscape. Re-engineering common sense on the left is, therefore, part-and-parcel with building new social practices and forms. And, it is precisely here that we are already witnessing the re-articulation of common sense through the alignment of interests

across new forms of social groupings that are far looser, and overlapping, than is suggested by both economic Marxism, and post-Marxist populism. These processes involve the construction of new ideological alignments, where these are operating beyond, and across, the fault-lines of class that have been traditionally identified by left movements. Any *re-articulation* of neoliberal socio-political forms will involve the construction of political alignments that work together to build shared interests, commitments, and meanings – we cannot deal with structural power by simply speaking from where we are situated in order that "we" are recognized. Rather, we need to actively construct social groups and standpoints that are always subject to current formations of structural power, even as they seek to uncover their conditions and transform them. Such alignments endeavor to coalesce common sense in a unity without unification, in order to construct and forge new norms, connections, and configurations of the social world [9].

So, this project of re-engineering common sense could not be simply a top-down campaign, but rather will need to involve the articulation of already existing dispositions and the construction of new spaces for social organisation. This is also to engage our desires, and to actualise these desires along the lines of progressive political forms of collective optimism and hope, as well as anger. For example, it is, to my mind, imperative that we do not give in to a regressive articulation of affect around freedom of movement and nationalism of the sort advocated by Blue Labour – that falls into a trap "implying that migration causes unhappiness by forcing people who are 'unalike' to live together", as Sara Ahmed put it [10]. Rather, we should continue to build new articulations of these feelings towards solidarity across workers, putting those who suffer most from the violence of the state and current common sense at the forefront. This is to actualise existing feel-

[9] On political articulation, see Stuart Hall (1985). "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-structuralist Debates." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 2 (2): 91–114. This understanding of articulation differs from the one given by Laclau and Mouffe since, re-articulation does not invoke a populist "we" whose identity is formed in opposition to the exclusionary power of liberal democracy, but rather invokes a complex, and intersecting set of social formations. See Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso Books.

[10] Sara Ahmed (2008). The Politics of Good Feeling. *Australasian Journal of Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 4(1).

ings, and experiences of the consequences of neoliberal decision-making, into political alignments that are neither determined by opposition to those conditions, nor concretise those emotions in a praxis of immediate and affective action. This also requires us to pay attention to the strategic reconstruction of our institutions and material processes to better scaffold and stabilize new norms, and practices. So, for example, we need to consider how to institutionalise more progressive social formations so that they can be scaled up, and used as platforms for further action.

As such, the project of re-engineering required to build new forms of power and common sense would be impossible without engaging with a broad and deep set of democratic activities. This is to absolutely refute the idea that the new forms of democratic action that we are witnessing from Momentum to Black Lives Matter are, in fact, anti-democratic attempts at incursion upon politics proper. Equally, we need to actively reconceive our democratic institutions, and to build new ones, which reach into our everyday lived realities. This requires that, on the left, we have conversations about collective rationality and reasoning together. For example, we need to ensure that our democratic practices both include those voices that have so often been excluded, and also involve practices and expressions that have been routinely discounted as “irrational”, “unreasonable”, or “emotional” (see also Marie).

In this regard, the left, as much as anywhere else, needs to face-up to its implication in structural neoliberalism, and to actively attempt to undo it in every setting. It is a well-trodden reality that systems of oppression tend to work their way back in to organisations on the left. This has often been dealt with by an emphasis on consensus, which occludes the dynamics of power and exclusion that operates in face-to-face decision making, and is frequently coupled with the obviation of organisation and hierarchy, which leads to a tyranny of structurelessness, entrenching those forms of power. Instead, radically democratic processes should not be considered absent of power, but rather to work within, and on, a landscape of power in order to reshape it towards local and generic structural jus-

tices. So, rather than think of democratic reasoning as just the joint assessment and comparison of claims made by individuals on a supposedly equal footing, we should consider the ways in which we collectively construct and articulate claims, reasons, and norms in these situations. This will require us to consider how those situations are already structured, along the lines of a landscape distributed with dispositions, habits, resources, limitations, and where our capacity to re-articulate that landscape will also depend upon our positions within it. Making this landscape visible, so refusing to allow those local sets of norms to become the horizon for discourse within our social groups and institutions, and working to revise them, is therefore integral to our democratic activity.

In light of this, and since the contemporary left intersects across several social settings and material structures, a new socialist movement may be understood as attempting to actualise and alter our dispositions and capacities to act along certain trajectories: as a collective direction of travel, rather than a unified set of beliefs. This is to shape, together, new forms of common sense in ways that we are already seeing – resculpting political possibility by beginning to make claims and positions seem more possible than others, building towards new forms of collective activity that move beyond neoliberal acceptability, and creating new social "realities". Much is yet to be done, but these alignments are already beginning to pool together as a complex and emergent movement, in which the domain of politics is not limited to Westminster, but is concerned with transformation across all of our forms of life, for the better.

6

Fascism without Borders: Britain and the BJP

by Shruti

In May 2015, as campaigning for the general election in Britain was underway, a flyer surfaced online urging “Dharmic voters” (a catch-all term intended to encompass Hindus, and those who the Hindu Right sees as part of its religious “family”, including Sikhs and Jains) to vote for the Conservative party. The document accused Labour and the Liberal Democrats of branding every “Dharmic” person “today and forever as being born casteist”, and exhorted members of those religious communities to vote Conservative,the only party willing to not pursue the matter of including caste as an axis of discrimination in the Equality Act 2010.

This ought not to be too surprising, given that in 2015 the Conservative government was already voicing discontent with anti-discrimination legislation they were mandated to enact under European law (a prelude to the Brexit that was to come), and that the most vocal opposition to anti-caste legislation has often come from the demographic of wealthy or middle-class upper-caste British-Indian votes they have sought to woo. In 2015, British-Indians were a key voting bloc for the Con-

servative Party, with an estimated 615,000 migrant Indian voters in the UK, and 1.4 million people of Indian origin living in the UK. This group has historically voted Labour – but the Tories have made significant inroads over the years, and by the election in 2017, a post-election survey showed that the Tories enjoyed an 8% advantage over Labour among British Hindus and Sikhs.

It is easy to see why – for one, Corbyn's social democratic offer alienated aspirational middle-class Indians; Theresa May has repeatedly emphasised the importance of India as a trading partner; and Corbyn has long been a supporter of the Dalit rights movement in the UK, and serves as honorary chairperson of the Dalit Solidarity movement. Further, Corbyn supported a motion in the House of Commons that called on the Secretary of State to reinstate a ban on the then-Gujarat Chief Minister (now India's Prime Minister) Narendra Modi's travel to the UK, given his alleged role in and failure to prevent the communal massacres of 2002 that claimed the lives of over a thousand Muslims in the state of Gujarat (including British nationals) and displaced thousands more.

Still, the British-Indian love affair with the Conservatives was by no means inevitable. Despite the ploys made by the Tories to scupper anti-caste legislation, including Bob Blackman's manifesto pledge to keep it out of the Equality Act in the 2017 election campaign, the major draw that Labour has held for middle-class Indians has been their comparatively progressive policies on both race and immigration, areas normally key to a migrant community's vote.

Several Labour Party members have also extended a warm hand to Narendra Modi – chief among them is Barry Gardiner, a man whose star has risen among Corbyn supporters after his performance during the election, who invited Modi to address the House of Commons, describing it as a "culmination of several years of engagement between senior representatives of the Labour Party and Modi". Gardiner, in his role as Chairman of Labour Friends of India, has been one of Narendra Modi's most vociferous champions and in an interview with the Times of India he revealed a warm admiration for the man himself, describing him as 'a secular leader who has the overwhelming support of all communities in

Gujarat…proven time and time again in state elections“. He added,”I have met politicians from across the world and I rank him on the pinnacle of all political leaders I have known. His competence to govern is unbelievable.”

During Modi’s state visit to Britain in 2015, several other senior Labour MPs (Keith Vaz, Virendra Sharma, Seema Malhotra, and Steve Pound) pledged to donate their pay raises to the dazzling event held at Wembley Stadium with David Cameron, which was highly attended by the British-Indian community. The three-day state visit resulted in more than £9 billion in signed business deals, and David Cameron heralding a “new and dynamic partnership” between Britain and India, one that was no longer “imprisoned by the past”.

The visit certainly did mark a change from the days when the US had repeatedly denied Modi a visa to enter, and the UK government had a working policy to have no contact with the Gujarat state government, over concerns regarding the bloodshed in Gujarat in 2002. The death toll was estimated to be over 1,000 persons (over 2,000 by some other estimates), largely perpetrated by organised groups of Hindus targeting Muslims, often with the tacit or explicit support of state forces. Mass rape, the burning alive of people, homes and small businesses, and the widespread destruction of mosques raged across the state for several weeks.

Modi has been widely held responsible by civil rights groups for the Gujarat government’s failure to act swiftly to respond to the violence, and the National Human Rights Commission reported numerous incidents of state collusion and a refusal to pursue justice against the perpetrators of violence. The state government steadfastly refused to pay compensation to victims, or provide anything but the most basic of relief to those displaced by the violence (of whom there were over 200,000) – many of whom have not returned to their villages or towns to this day.

Narendra Modi has neither personally apologised for the violence nor expressed any regret, and went on to appoint key figures accused of instigating the violence to high-level government positions. When the United States government under George W. Bush denied Modi a visa, citing the National Human Rights Com-

mission report on the 2002 violence, Modi and his party reacted with outrage – variously labelling it an act of “racism”, an “insult to the entire nation”, an “insult to the Constitution”, and claiming it did not need “lessons in religious freedom from anyone in the world”.

There are strong reasons to reconsider the reversal of this approach – even if Modi is now the Prime Minister of the country, and even if he was elected to that position. Since the ascendancy of Narendra Modi’s party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to power there has been a growing climate of hate and fear that targets marginalised groups, silences those that dissent from the government’s enforced jingoism by branding them as “anti-national”, and further emboldens the militant Hindu fundamentalist elements within the party and their ferociously anti-Muslim politics.

To those who know the origins of the BJP and its ideology, this will seem an almost natural outcome of their politics – they are linked to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist group whose founders consider Indian national identity to be narrowly identified with Hindu culture and beliefs: religious minorities must pay allegiance to the Hindu nation and refrain from practicing their faith in the public sphere.

Not much has changed for the contemporary avatars of Hindu nationalism. It remains a project committed to reducing religious minorities to second-class citizens, consolidating a muscular iteration of what it sees to be “Hinduism” (often a distillation of upper-caste practices and beliefs) through a cultural and electoral absorption of castes and tribes that have historically been excluded from Hinduism. The results of this are visible nearly everywhere across the country today – mob lynchings of Dalits and Muslims are on the rise, often accompanied by allegations that the victims were are carrying beef or transporting cattle for slaughter (as the cow is considered by some Hindus to be a sacred animal); the state gives credence to spurious claims that inter-religious marriages are a plot by Muslim men to “steal” Hindu women and there have been numerous attacks on non-governmental organisations and universities that criticise the government.

In January 2015, Priya Pillai from Greenpeace India was scheduled to travel to London to testify on the effects of Essar Energy's mining before she was deplaned. The Indian government claimed that she was not allowed to travel as her testimony would project a "negative" image of the government at an international level – never mind that the abuses of the UK-registered coal mining company were being inflicted on its own indigenous citizens. It later emerged that the Central Government had also had a hand in events at Hyderabad Central University where a Dalit student who was involved in student politics, Rohith Vemula, was stripped of his scholarship and subjected to institutional persecution until he committed suicide in January 2016. The then-Minister for Human and Resource Development had received a letter accusing the student group of engaging in "anti-Hindu" activities and it was this that led to the suspensions. Subsequent events at Jawaharlal Nehru University in February 2016 advanced this assault on students – after student groups held protests to mark the hanging of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri separatist who the state claims had a hand in a 2001 Parliament attack though this has been widely disputed, three students were later arrested and charged with sedition for allegedly shouting 'anti-national' slogans.

For those who believed that Modi's affiliation with the RSS, which began in his boyhood, would be tempered by high office, that the moderate elements in his party would win out, or even that the trend to authoritarian religious nationalism would be a price worth paying for economic progress and development – none of these promises have been borne out.

The debacle that was "demonetisation" (an overnight move taken by the Government that rendered 86% of currency notes invalid) has had lingering financial effects; surveys have indicated that unemployment is at a 5 year high; whilst investment in improving social welfare and government employment schemes has so far been negligible. For all the bluster of the government, their constant unveiling of new plans and slogans, there is only so much that can distract from the ground reality of economic pressures – religious polarisation and jingoism can only carry them so far electorally. And yet, this is precisely the strategy they are

employing. In a move that stunned many, Yogi Adityanath was made Chief Minister of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, in March 2017 – Adityanath is a man widely seen as representative of the most violent elements of the BJP, having been involved in drives to mass "convert" religious minorities to Hinduism, engaging in murderous anti-Muslim rhetoric, and calling on the Indian government to adopt a ban similar to Trump's ban on citizens from 7 Muslim-majority countries from entering the country.

Under ordinary circumstances this should be more than enough to give pause for thought, but not in the post-Brexit era. Britain is desperate for allies outside Europe for the uncertain years that lie ahead, as was made clear when Theresa May made her first trade mission visit to India in November 2016. In many ways, the Conservative Party has made its own compromises with the far Right in the United Kingdom – adopting its racist and xenophobic line on migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers – and British governments have hardly minded turning a blind eye to the actions of its friends in the past. But the sanitisation of Hindutva (as Hindu nationalism is called by its adherents) in British politics marks a dangerous turn – far from being uneasy bedfellows, it marks a willingness to completely disregard all prior apprehensions about Narendra Modi's record to leap into trade arrangements and business deals.

The controversy around the inclusion of caste in the Equality Act also demonstrates that Hindutva has a role to play in British politics too: in consolidating an identity around Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs, and in opposing mechanisms of justice being made available to Dalit and Bahujan diaspora by calling caste a product of colonialism and arguing that legislating it would entrench it. Besides, Hindutva groups are active in the British-Indian community beyond lobbying against anti-caste legislation – the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) is the overseas wing of the RSS and is a UK-registered charity, and the Hindu Student Council has a similar ideological outlook. The HSS was investigated for hate speech by the Charity Commission after a speaker engaged in anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric at a camp, and has been told to distance itself from the RSS. Meanwhile,

Priti Patel has openly expressed her admiration for the RSS and Narendra Modi's "vision", whilst Bob Blackman has publicly attended HSS events where the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, was in attendance. The international wings of the RSS actively fundraise and funnel their money into their activities, fuelling their campaigns of religious communalism including military training for their recruits in camps that teach them to fight for the "Hindu nation".

The untrammelled rise of Modi to power has meant that he has received little international scrutiny for either his actions or those committed and enabled by his government, party, and groups affiliated to it. If Corbyn's Labour party is serious about furthering transnational solidarities based on social and economic justice, they must refuse to engage in the cynical electoral and economic ploys of the Conservative Party. Opposing Modi's government, questioning his human rights record, and continuing to support the struggle to enact anti-caste legislation must form part of a singular strategy to combat a government that enables and intensifies the persecution of minorities – this is the internationalism needed in this era to counter fascism.

7

‘The Past we inherit, the Future we build’: Lessons from the Durham Miners’ Gala

by Kieran Dodds

A city’s character is both constantly negotiated in the struggle between its constituent parts, and shaped and re-shaped by its relationship with local and global economies. As David Harvey has written, cities are defined by a hierarchy in which ‘local centres [dominate] local hinterlands [and] more important metropolitan centres [dominate] lesser centres’ [1]. In Durham, this struggle plays out very much in public. Its city centre metropole draws in daytrippers from periphery ex-colliery towns at the same time as it grants temporary visas to Home Counties econ students. Durham City has no collective accent; it is at once Consett’s Barry Venison and the *Financial Times’* Sebastian Payne. But to take a train north on the second Saturday of July is to understand none of this. For the duration of the Durham Miners’ Gala, the city belongs to those hinterlands, lesser centres,

[1] David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*, London: Edward Arnold, 1979, p.262.

daytrippers, 200,000 strong this year.

Readers of this journal will likely know the radical traditions of Durham's miners as celebrated in their annual show of solidarity. This 8 July saw the 133rd such gathering, brass orchestras supplying theme songs for folk memories of 1926 intransigence and 1984 defeat – and, perhaps, hopes of a sort of 21st-century rebirth (of militant politics at least). To the uninitiated, the Gala must feel daunting and disorientating, at once ancestral procession and almighty piss-up. To those for whom the Gala is part of the furniture, it is nonetheless deeply resonant. Where post-industrial north-eastern communities in the neoliberal decades have hobbled, at the Gala, they march.

In the context of a continued marginalisation of working class voices and lives, events like the Durham Miners' Gala are important. That said, its popular relevance is surprising. In some marked ways, the fortunes of the Gala dovetail with that of Corbynism. Once an essential date in the Labour Party leadership's calendar, the event was cast as an irrelevance or, worse, relic during the years of New Labour. Before Ed Miliband's symbolic 2012 appearance, no Labour leader had addressed the Gala in 23 years. (It could be that they were scared off by the experience of Neil Kinnock. In 1985, Tony Benn writes in his diaries, '[Kinnock] was so unhelpful to the miners that, when he began speaking, the bands started up and they marched off').[2]

When Jeremy Corbyn took to the Durham stage during his first Labour leadership contest in 2015, the Gala's future was in doubt. The organisers – Durham Miners' Association (DMA), an affiliate of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) – finding themselves bereft of funding turned to an innovative membership model to protect its future. For a small donation, attendees could become 'marras' of the Gala. Like the Labour Party, where once it depended on generous donors, the Gala is now funded by friends and supporters. Corbyn's message in 2015 meanwhile could hardly have been more of a departure from the Labour of Yarl's Wood

[2] Tony Benn (ed. Ruth Winstone), *A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine: The Last Diaries*, London: Arrow Books, 2013, p.150.

and right accommodationism: ‘There is no way forward in blaming migrants and minorities for our problems; the only way forward is unity in struggle’. A year on, he returned to give arguably his most accomplished speech, this time during the second contest, drawing on the intellectual force of Paraguayan former goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert: > There is no pressure on me, none whatsoever. Real pressure – real pressure – is when you don’t have enough money to feed your kids, when you don’t have a roof over your head, when you are wondering if you are going to be cared for, when you are wondering how you can survive, you are wondering how you are going to cope with the debts you have incurred, you are wondering if your lovely employer is going to give you a call to give you a couple of hours work or not bother, or change their mind when you are on the bus on the way to do that job.

Prior to 2017 and his returning to a hero’s welcome, one imagines panicked, out of practice trumpeters furiously trying to learn the White Stripes’ *Seven Nation Army* in anticipation of the now famous chant.

That the ‘modernisers’ of New Labour objected to Durham Miners’ Gala is no surprise, their political project underpinned, as they perceived it, by a need to adapt ‘traditional Labour Party views, or old-style socialism’ to a transformed world. This misses that the Gala was never about ‘old-style socialism’. Those in Durham who carry their past above their heads are rather instrumentalising ‘tradition’, their recall serving the purposes not of nostalgia but, perhaps, ‘modernisation’. The banner of South Hetton Lodge reads, ‘Lest we forget those who went before us’. One of many such messages, it is useful to read alongside a famous NUM injunction oft-repeated at the Gala: ‘The past we inherit, the future we build’. This is a view of history in keeping with that of Marx and Engels; that is, ‘history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims’.[3] In this injunction, static heritage is rendered living history. It is ‘tradition as weapon’, as the Africanist Jan Vansina put it in a different context.[4]

[3] Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique*, trans. Richard Dixon, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956, p.125.

[4] Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Oxford: James Currey, 1985, p.102.

There are lessons to be learned here for the Labour Party. For one, the Big Meeting represents something of an example of Corbyn's proposed 'kinder politics', which after all ought to incorporate the twin strands of fellowship and militancy. There is no contradiction in hardness to authority and kindness to those upon whom authority's hardness itself falls. This was a truth instinctively grasped by the late Davey Hopper, former General Secretary of the DMA, so celebrated by 2017's speakers and attendees, and one that permeates the lodge banners, Chopwell and Follonsby boasting likenesses of Lenin, Marx, Keir Hardie, James Connolly, and trade union leaders A.J. Cook and George Harvey. The Big Meeting is, however, in one crucial way an imperfect example of what our politics should be.. Groups such as Women Against Pit Closures, LGSM, and this year the WASPI women are integral to the Gala, but its podiums have historically failed to reflect this diversity.

The much-discussed promise of Corbynism is to marry the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left, with a caucus of socialist representatives in Westminster guided and influenced by a deep network of social movements and community groups. Surprisingly, given widespread electoral pessimism and establishment panic around hard left movementism, the project has been rather more successful in securing seats than it has mobilising action at the grassroots. As pointed out by Alex Niven in a perceptive essay on what he cautiously calls the 'English Rustbelt', one partial exception even to this electoral breakthrough has been the deindustrialised Durham coalfield. By engaging with events such as the Gala and taking seriously once more its attendees, Corbyn's Labour can make good on its promise to put the Party back at the heart of communities. Constituency parties can learn, for example, from the the Big Meeting's Education4Action initiative, which stages film screenings, hosts public lectures, and promotes a programme of young and adult political education from its Redhills base. It may sound trite, but radical social democracy is radical local democracy.

Niven is right, too, that it is only by *challenging* social conservatism where it does exist among working class communities – rather than pandering to the 'le-

gitimate concerns' of a ludicrously ill-defined if not illusory 'white working class' – that solidarity can be built and voters won. Durham Miners' Gala stands at the interstices of a sort of labour movement provincialism and the best traditions of working class internationalism, and it is telling that some on the left would valorise one and deny the other. Since 2011, Durham speakers have included Carlos Barrios Contrera and Carlos Bugueno Alfara, two Chilean survivors of the Copiapó mining collapse; two more striking Asturian miners; delegations from Venezuela and Cuba; and Gerardo Hernandez and Rene Gonzalez, two of the unjustly imprisoned Miami Five. The DMA has also supported the delivery of ambulances to Cuba and during apartheid stood side-by-side with black South African mineworkers, some of whom were invited to spend time in the homes of their Durham counterparts. Just as the close of Corbyn's 2017 speech imploring government action in response to the refugee crisis was met with applause, so did ordinary attendees take an enthusiastic interest in international struggles and donate to far-off solidarity funds.

In recent years, and especially post-Brexit, a rival internationalism has come to overshadow its left variant and near-monopolise the concept, its definition capital flow rather than solidarity. From his jollies at Durham Miners' Gala in 2015, for example, the FT's aforementioned Sebastian Payne tweeted, 'Representative of Cuban mineworkers urges crowd to "think beyond borders" after attacking NAFTA and free trade agreements'. Commentariat comrade John Rentoul meanwhile sneered at Labour's 2017 manifesto commitment to responsible supply chains in the Global South, assuming potential working class Labour voters unable to comprehend evidently necessary concepts like environmental sustainability. This is not in fact internationalism at all, but Boris Johnson's self-described 'liberal cosmopolitanism'. It is the logic of the 'Barista Visa'. Indeed, it requires a defence of 'cosmopolitics' against the cosmopolitans, confronting the myth that working class people are unwilling to 'think beyond borders' and encouraging political communication rooted in the connectedness of struggles. Nadine El-Enany is right that the recent Grenfell atrocity must be seen in its correct context of coloniality and state racism, but it recalls also a feature of 19th and 20th century pit

disasters: namely, elite complicity in the deaths of the oppressed.

Corbyn has described Durham Miners' Gala as 'Europe's biggest demonstration of working class culture'. While this might be true, it is useful only because 'culture' is leveraged in the same way as the pit banners leverage working class history. Without a recognition that its culture cannot but be linked to class, and a resolve to construct from that culture a moral, outward politics, Durham on Gala day would exist as a kind of enlarged Beamish Museum, more artefact than 'weapon'. In Stuart Hall's memorable turn of phrase, '[Popular culture] is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply "expressed". But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why "popular culture" matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it.' [5] If we in Labour are serious about reaffirming solidarity as that which underpins our project, the Big Meeting ought to be held up not as idle reminiscence, but as an exercise in future-building.

[5] Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing "The Popular"', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp.227-240, at p.239.

8

Interpreting Mariátegui: Lessons from Peru for the British Left

by Daniel Willis

It is difficult to interpret exactly why José Carlos Mariátegui is such an unknown figure among the pantheon of international Marxist thinkers regularly discussed or referenced by the British Left. In part, this lack of knowledge, of arguably Latin America's greatest Marxist thinker, could be explained by his early death at only the age of 35. Another explanation could simply be a degree of snobbish Eurocentrism which dismisses figures from the so-called developing world as being unable to contribute to knowledge in the so-called Global North.

But perhaps the most convincing explanation can be found in Mariátegui's greatest potential contribution to Leftist thinking in the UK. That is because Mariátegui did not simply attempt to apply Marxist (or Marxist-Leninist) doctrine to Peru, but adapted international theories of class struggle to the society which he saw around him. In short, he developed a class-based analysis of Peruvian society

which was as rooted in the realities of national, regional and local politics as it was in the European ideas of global proletarian struggle.

Although Mariátegui's life and work describes a world both temporally and spatially distant from the present day UK, his form of analysis has important implications for understanding the role of the Left in Britain today. At present, the Labour Party appears on course for further internal division, not just between the Corbynite and Blairite wings of the party but also between two competing interpretations of the relationship of the Left to class. MPs such as Phil Wilson (MP for Sedgefield), who represent mostly northern constituencies which have greatly suffered the effects of deindustrialisation, argue that while Corbyn's Labour is increasingly attractive to students and residents of the UK's big cities, they have lost their connection to the working-class communities in former industrial heartlands of the north.

Advocating for a more nationally-based understanding of socialism in this context may appear rather alarming to some (not least because of the historical connotations of "national socialism"), but this is by no means a call to install immigration controls and do away with international solidarity. What Mariátegui argued for in the case of Peru, particularly in his *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928), was for a more complex understanding of class which pays attention to the influence of race and ethnicity, co-existing modes of production and the politics of space in a given nation.

This re-examination of the nature of class alongside contemporary politics and economics is absolutely vital. Like it or not, deindustrialisation and Thatcherism have changed the British landscape, and with it they have vastly altered the rules of the game for the Labour Party and Left in general. Whilst a re-examination or where we go from here has already begun (see these *New Socialist* analyses on re-interpreting class through geography and gender), it is vital for the British Left to continue this work to move forward, and for the Labour Party to continue to appeal to the populations of former industrial heartlands as well as major urban centres.

This project could benefit greatly from a closer reading of Mariátegui's life and writing, a more detailed analysis of which you will find in the paragraphs below.

Life of Mariátegui

Born in 1894, Mariátegui spent most of his early twenties writing for a number of increasingly radical left-wing magazines and newspapers in Peru's capital, Lima. In 1918, he set up his own left-wing publication, *La Razón*, which marked his turn towards socialism and away from the Creole politics represented by Lima's whiter middle-class (as opposed to the indigenous, Quechua-speaking population of Peru, located predominantly in Andean regions). Mariátegui was influenced by the Peruvian anarchist Manuel González Prada, and both became highly critical of the domination of land ownership by a small group of land-owners (known as *latifundistas* or *gamonales*).

Although the 1910s and 1920s were an important period for the development of the Peruvian Left, they were also marked by state suppression. After a coup d'état in 1919 which brought Augusto Leguía into power for his second Presidential term, Mariátegui was faced with the probability of going into prison or exile, of which he (perhaps preemptively) chose the latter. On returning to Peru, Mariátegui worked closely with the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) led by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre. However, APRA's suppression (and anti-communist rhetoric) led Mariátegui to leave and set up his own socialist party, which would later become the Peruvian Communist Party (PCP). He was also involved in the creation of the General Confederation of Peruvian Workers (CGTP) which took part in the Latin American trade union conference in 1929.

Sadly, the next year he died a young death at the age of 35.

Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality

Mariátegui's influence and impact on future generations of the Latin American Left, however, had already been secured. His 1928 book *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (SIEoPR) is, in part, a Marxist economic analysis of Peru's history which understood the country as a semi-feudal nation dominated by the political and economic power of the *latifundistas*. The *latifundistas*, Mariátegui argued, were "indifferent not only to the interests of the proletariat but also to those of the bourgeoisie", and as such were guilty of consigning Peru to economic underdevelopment.

What Mariátegui saw in Peru convinced him of two major critiques of international Marxist thought in the 1920s. Although the *latifundistas* were an agrarian nobility, they also accumulated capital and acted as capitalists by making alliances with foreign (predominantly British) business interests. Therefore, Mariátegui saw both feudal and capitalist modes of production existing simultaneously in Peruvian society, instead of a linear progression from one to the other. Secondly, Mariátegui saw that the power of the *latifundistas* was so great, and that the Peruvian state was structured so completely in their favour and the interests of international capital, that Peruvian society would not simply progress dialectically from feudalism to capitalism to socialism, but was instead consigned to existing in its semi-feudal, semi-capitalist state.

However, SIEoPR is far more than a simple economic history. The second essay, "The Problem of the Indian", is devoted to Mariátegui's understanding of the integration of the indigenous population into Peruvian society, and the potential for indigenous communities to develop as a proletariat. In this essay, he argues that:

> ANY TREATMENT OF THE PROBLEM of the Indian—written or verbal—that fails or refuses to recognize it as a socio-economic problem is but a sterile, theoretical exercise destined to be com-

> pletely discredited…Any attempt to solve it with administrative or police measures, through education or by a road building program, is superficial and secondary as long as the feudalism of the gamonales continues to exist.
>
> In articulating this position, Mariátegui defines the social integration of indigenous communities as fundamentally one of class struggle. However, he adds greater complexity to this picture by also highlighting the importance of cultural and social factors which reinforce the indigenous population's lowly class position. Mariátegui appears well ahead of his time, articulating an understanding of society and Marxist theory which is rooted in the politics of space long before Henri Lefebvre and others. In doing so, he does not simply apply a class-based analysis to explain Peru, but highlights how traditional Marxist understandings of class must be adapted to understand indigenous integration.

The rest of SIEoPR deals with a number of issues including religion, education, literature and land reform. Taken together, these chapters highlight the numerous forms of exclusion experienced by the indigenous population: racial, economic, spatial, social, and cultural. In this way, Mariátegui demonstrates that while the indigenous population's exclusion is fundamentally rooted in economics and the land, their position as a class is far more complex than a simple economic calculation.

The importance of Mariátegui today

Mariátegui today remains a writer underappreciated outside of Latin America. In Peru, his legacy remains strong having influenced Leftist thinkers such as Alberto Flores Galindo (although his grand-nephew Aldo is a staunch right-winger, a sort of Peruvian Piers Morgan who has written his own *Eighth Essay*) and through

the mobilization of the CGTP, although the PCP has long-since fractured into a myriad factions (many of whom engaged in open conflict with the state in the second half of the twentieth century). In other Andean countries, his writings on the indigenous population remain relevant for those who, like Flores Galindo, believe that the mobilisation of the indigenous population is the most logical route to socialism.

The potential for Mariátegui's writings to shape understandings of British society has certainly not been written about in any great depth. Yet, rather than seeing any direct comparisons between the 1920s Peruvian society he describes and our own, his writings on class, culture and the politics of land and space have important contributions to make if the British Left is to truly revitalise its own intellectual proposition in the near future.

9

Class Power and Red Robbo

by Jack Saunders

The death of car worker, trade union activist and Communist Derek “Red Robbo” Robinson last month at the age of 90 did not make an especially huge splash in the national media. For a while, only the BBC West Midlands broke with the story, before eventually obituaries began to trickle into the broadsheets. Yet Robinson remains one of very few union activists of that period widely remembered by the British public. Mention the industrial unrest of the 1970s to people of a certain age and a sizeable proportion will mutter “Oh yeah, Red Robbo and all that”.

It is a peculiar collective memory. The other figures that my parents’ generation retain from that era are almost all general secretaries – Jack Jones, maybe Hughie Scanlon. Certainly Robinson was heavily demonised in the media at the time, but he was far from the only workplace activist to receive similar treatment in that period. The British popular press in the 1970s was an endless parade of evil car workers, miners, hospital workers, electricians, posties and rubbish collectors, all apparently responsible for Britain’s downfall.

Indeed, Robinson was very far from being Britain’s most disruptive shop steward. News of his death was accompanied by the eye-catching claim that Robinson

had been responsible for 523 strikes during his five-year tenure as convenor of the Longbridge Works Committee. This claim, originally made by the man who sacked him, Michael Edwardes, Chief Executive of British Leyland from 1977 to 1982, is wholly implausible to anyone with a passing knowledge of industrial relations. In reality, from the 1950s onwards Longbridge had a pattern of endemic industrial conflict in which small, short strikes, organised autonomously by work groups, were a feature of daily life, largely outside of the control of senior stewards like Robinson.

More often than not, as factory convenor, Robinson found himself in the role of mediator, attempting to persuade groups of irritated workers to resume production after something had provoked a stoppage. Interviews with workers and managers alike remember Robinson as a conciliatory figure, doing his best to balance defending workers' rights with the need to maintain continuous production and keep the struggling firm afloat. As one co-worker, a fellow toolmaker, put it in 1981, "until his dismissal Derek Robinson was hauled out of bed on numerous occasions by the company, 'Can you go back Derek, the men are preparing to walk out. Can you go back, and try and prevent it.' And Derek Robinson used to get out of his bed at 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning, go into that factory and reach agreement with the men."

Robinson's sacking centred not on him disrupting production but on his co-authoring of a critique of the Edwardes Plan, a company document aimed at rationalising British Leyland at the cost of tens of thousands of jobs. Reducing the authority of the unions within the company was deemed necessary to ensure compliance with the scheme and sacking the best-known shop-floor leader was a sure-fire way of putting everybody on notice. Robinson's later demonization as a strike-starter and troublemaker was part of a search for a post-hoc justification sturdier than sacking a man for signing a document.

Later the myth of Robinson as the ultimate troublemaker Communist shop steward came to stand for the wider myth of Britain's 1970s as an endless cycle of wanton trade union wrecking. Just as Robinson's illusory 523 strikes apparently

killed British Leyland, the unions were responsible for leading Britain into decline, a decline in which the motor industry, that quintessential sign of competitive modernity, was itself a symbol. Both myths served to obscure a wider point about the period, that the increase in industrial militancy was driven not by union barons or by politically-motivated militants, but by levels of organisation and dissatisfaction within the workplace. Robinson was frequently called back to work in the early hours of the morning because night-shift workers, with no reference to their leaders or officials, regularly organised spontaneous walk-outs. Management called Robinson because the collective power of those workers meant they had to be persuaded rather than disciplined back to work.

Similar omissions mark most popular accounts of the 1970s, which usually look upon union militancy as something initiated by the unions as institutions, rather than as something produced by working-class people within their workplaces. As a result, “the unions” retain their place in our national demonology without the demonisers having to bear the taint of having attacked “ordinary working people”. The mythology of that period can locate the seeds of decline in “bad unions” and the politically marginal people who bore formal authority within them, without reminding us of the social power that some of the organised working class bore in that period. Political discourse in the 1970s and beyond set about teaching Britain that collective direct action stems not from our grievances but from the manipulations of outsiders, a lesson a generation learned so well that even with Derek Robinson’s death, the myth of Red Robbo lives on.